INDEPENDENT INFORMATION FOR SMART CONSUMERS

choice

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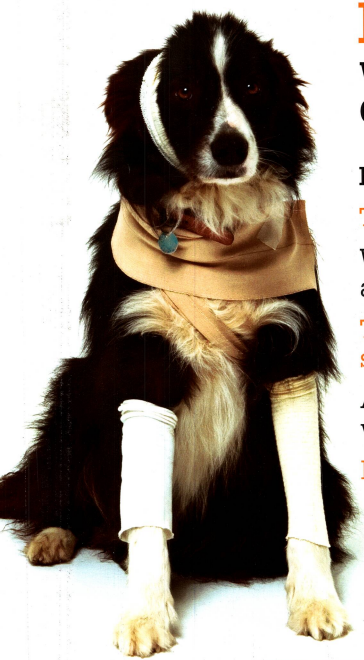
Cosmetic cocktail
Should you be worried about the number of chemicals in cosmetics?

Detergents
Our Home Testers find the best value dishwasher tablets, powders and liquids.

On test

- Digital radios
- Dishwashers
- Tyres
- Knife sharpeners
- Juicers
- Vacuums
- Child bike seats and trailers



Pet insurance

Will it save you money? CHOICE investigates

PLUS

Tax time – what to claim

Which frozen chips, fries and wedges make the grade?

Trans fat test – why you should avoid the bad oil

Are digital radios worth the expense?

Electric blanket buying guide

144 PRODUCTS RATED!

How bright is your future? Find out what CHOICE members say in our latest survey results

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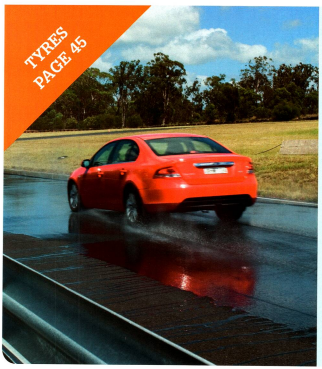

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Comment

From CHOICE's new CEO

It's a great privilege to be leading CHOICE as we enter our 50th year. Few organisations last 50 years, and even fewer are as vibrant and necessary today as they were at the start. CHOICE is already a household name; my job is to make it essential for *every* household and we can only do that with your support.

CHOICE exists to unlock the power of consumers and we do this through providing clear information, advice and support on consumer goods and services; by taking action with consumers against bad practice wherever it exists; and fearlessly speaking out to promote the consumer interest – your interest. It is my ambition that Australians will be the most savvy and active consumers in the world.

Meeting the needs of our members is my number one concern. That is why I speak to members every day on the phone, to find out how we can improve what we do – so apologies in advance if I call you at an inconvenient time!

From speaking to members, I know the global financial crisis is hitting you in different ways. Some feel better off because of low interest rates, others feel worse off for the same reason and many of you are concerned about your jobs and long-term financial security. However, I've also been told that CHOICE has never been more valuable, helping you make value-for-money decisions about purchases; an indispensable ally when times are tough.

I'm also aware that at *all* times CHOICE has to be value for money. For this reason there will be no price increases this year. At the same time, we plan to invest more in product testing as well as improvements to our website and magazine layout. From next month you will receive the new-look magazine and when you go to www.choice.com.au from September you will notice big improvements to the site. We value our members and we will never take your loyalty for granted.

Meeting your expectations is my first duty; my second duty is to make CHOICE attractive to millions of families across Australia. That's why we set up CHOICE Switch; to help you and millions of other Australians save money on energy bills and – soon – other household spending. It's also why we had a duty to take on Grocery CHOICE, to give consumers access to supermarket price comparisons at the touch of a button. Supermarkets understandably feel concerned about the impact of enhanced competition on their prices, which is precisely why every consumer I speak to wants us to succeed. This month we are launching the new Grocery CHOICE website. It won't be perfect but over the next few months we will continue to improve the site so it becomes an invaluable tool for shoppers during hard economic times and beyond.

Last month, more than 12,000 members took part in a research project to help us identify the issues you think need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. High grocery prices and unfair bank charges are two of the most important, so we will step up our work in these two areas. Members also strongly supported CHOICE working for a health system free of commercial bias. And you want us to help make it easier to make ethical and sustainable choices. If you didn't take part in the research project but would like your views to be heard, please visit www.choice.com.au/action and leave your suggestions.

CHOICE is a force for good in Australia and I feel passionately we can build an even stronger organisation that will help consumers be more powerful, more savvy and more active. As a result we can all help to create a culture where consumer expectations are high and continue to rise, where organisations focus on satisfying consumer needs, where what is good for consumers is good for business. A virtuous cycle of consumer benefit.

Some say that life begins at 50 and we will be making sure it does for our members, for Australian consumers and for CHOICE. Thank you for your loyalty and continued support.

Nick Stace
Chief Executive

CHOICEextra.com.au This free website for CHOICE magazine subscribers is an index of articles from Jan/Feb 2002, with links to PDFs.

CHOICE Plus Get the magazine plus full online access when you upgrade your membership for just $11.50 per quarter (usually $21.95 for online membership). Go to www.choiceextra.com.au and follow the prompts.

Clinical trials of a vaccine for coeliac disease have begun in Melbourne.

HEALTH

Gluten-free bonanza

Sales of gluten-free foods are booming, but a vaccine for coeliac disease is in sight.

The retail market for gluten-free foods and drinks is exploding, according to a report published in April by the US market research company Packaged Facts. The boom seems to be driven by a growing belief – probably mistaken – that a gluten-free diet will help with ailments as diverse as autism, attention deficit disorder, irritable bowel syndrome and multiple sclerosis. But the report coincides with an announcement from the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne of the start of clinical trials of a vaccine for coeliac disease, a condition genuinely caused by intolerance to wheat gluten and similar proteins in rye and barley.

The immune system of people with coeliac disease reacts to gluten by damaging the lining of the small intestine, limiting its ability to absorb nutrients, causing diarrhoea and chronic health problems such as osteoporosis and increased risk of intestinal cancer. Research suggests that coeliac disease could be dramatically under-diagnosed in Australia. About two Australians in 1000 have been diagnosed with it, but studies suggest four times as many may suffer from the disease without realising. Until a vaccine is successfully developed, the only recourse for people who have coeliac disease is to stick rigorously to a gluten-free diet.

The foods that most obviously contain gluten are bread, breakfast cereals, cakes and pasta, but many processed foods also contain wheat-based ingredients – and the only way to tell is by checking the ingredients list on the label. While this vigilance may help those choosing to avoid gluten, those who have coeliac disease and need to avoid it are often left with little option but to buy gluten-free labels at premium prices. On average, gluten-free bread, cereals and pasta cost up to three times as much as their regular equivalents.

For more information on coeliac disease, go to www.coeliacsociety. com.au. ■

PHONE CARD MARKETING

Deceptive phone card marketing targeted

A major telco has been accused of using misleading information in its marketing.

The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) has taken legal action against CardCall, the largest seller of long-distance phone cards in Australia. It alleges CardCall misrepresented that "certain phone cards would provide consumers with a specified amount of call time" when that was not the case unless a customer made a continuous long call, and "no fees other than timed call charges would apply" when in fact other fees were charged. This behaviour breaches the Trade Practices Act, which prohibits companies from engaging in misleading or deceptive conduct and making false or misleading representations.

In March, the Federal Court found Tel.Pacific, CardCall's biggest competitor, had misled and deceived consumers over its international phone cards. Steve Picton, CardCall CEO, says the company would like to have settled with ACCC without needing to go to court. He says CardCall initiated discussions with the ACCC in 2008 in an effort to clean up the industry. "We have been instrumental in developing new guidelines for the whole phone card industry." The changes affect all phone card companies, with some having to issue new compliant material.

CardCall has relaunched its cards and marketing messages to make the terms, conditions and fees clearer. It will now advertise a per-minute call rate, rather than the total number of minutes that may be provided with a card. Flag fall fees, surcharges and the absence of per-second billing can mean customers who make short phone calls get fewer minutes than what was previously advertised.

Complaints to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman about phone cards increased 61% in the year to 30 June 2008. There was a 97% increase in complaints about "pricing or other advertised terms being inaccurate, incomplete or out of date". ■

CHOICE FORUM OF THE MONTH

Unfair gym contracts Our investigation (*CHOICE*, May 2009) found the gym industry is excellent at recruiting new members, but far less efficient in explaining the price, contract and cancellation terms. Many members have discovered how tricky it can be to cancel their memberships. Go to **www.choice.com.au/gymyoursay** to join the forum.

GREENWASH

Voluntary green code for ads weak

Will consumers really be protected from misleading 'green' claims when self-regulation by the advertising industry begins?

As protecting and sustaining our environment becomes increasingly important, consumers are bombarded by green claims for products and services ranging from beer to flights. But not all of them can be backed up, giving rise to "greenwash", where consumers are taken for a ride.

The Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) has proposed the development of a self-regulatory green marketing code that attempts to curb misleading green claims, however CHOICE is concerned it won't go far enough. Under the code, advertisers will not be able to imply they have voluntarily adopted a practice already required by law, and they must substantiate all environmental claims, which must represent benefit or significant improvement to the overall environmental impact of the product.

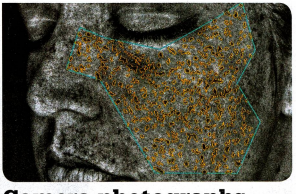
However, as we've regularly reported, recent cases demonstrate the lack of effectiveness of self-regulation by the advertising industry. For instance, the code on food marketing to children has failed to protect kids from the unhealthy influence of junk food advertisements. A CHOICE-commissioned Newspoll survey found 88% of Australian parents believe marketing of food specifically to children contributes to parents' difficulties in ensuring children develop better eating habits, and 82% were in favour of increasing government regulation of the way unhealthy foods are advertised and marketed to children.

Although the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission has issued its *Green Marketing and the Trade Practices Act* guide, regulation of environmental claims remains insufficient as it is limited to false or misleading claims, and does not address other forms of environmental marketing messages such as being vague or making claims that do not provide the full picture.

CHOICE believes investigation of environmental claims requires expertise, something the industry's self-regulatory body, the Advertising Standards Bureau, does not have. We also want the Australian standard on environmental claims updated and made mandatory.

Voluntary compliance with the AANA's new green code begins next year. For more information or to tell us about dodgy green claims you've come across, visit our Green Watch campaign at www.choice.com.au/greenwatch. ■

SKIN CANCER



Camera photographs skin damage

An advanced camera is the key to ongoing research that aims to help Australians protect themselves from skin cancer.

A long-term Queensland study examining the link between sun exposure and skin cancer is using a cutting-edge camera to reveal disturbing skin damage not normally visible to the naked eye. The camera was acquired from the US, where a similar study has led to an extensive database of different skin types. It has been modified for Australian use by researchers at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), who are calling for study participants. They aim to compile a database of Australian skin types, which will contribute to the longer-term objective of detecting risk factors for skin cancer.

"We'd like to assess if we can, through a non-invasive way, how much damage people have done to their skin and see what their risk of developing skin cancer is," says Michael Kimlin, Associate Professor of QUT's AusSun Research Laboratory.

The camera operates by taking ordinary photos using ultraviolet (UV) light. Low-light UV is shone on participants' faces so researchers can see where it is absorbed and reflected – lots of damage will show up as darker. The results are then used to place people into categories, comparing their recorded skin damage with others of the same and different ages. Professor Kimlin says the results so far have been alarming.

If you live interstate and want to be part of the study you can have your photo taken whenever you visit Queensland. "We are looking for a representative sample of skin types in Australia," says Kimlin. "We can take anyone from age 10 onwards and we're looking for a range of different skin, eye and hair colour."

People are asked to fill out a short questionnaire, have pictures of their face taken, will be able to look at their skin damage and have their progress tracked over time. To be a part of the study, contact QUT on 07 3138 0004. ■

CHOICE does not believe the advertising industry's self-regulating body, the Advertising Standards Bureau, is sufficiently qualified to investigate environmental claims.

Identity theft from social networking sites is a growing problem, but there are steps you can take to protect yourself.

ONLINE SECURITY

Social cyber-threats

Social networking sites help you connect, but are you at increased risk of identity theft?

People who use social networking sites are vulnerable to cyber-thieves seeking personal information. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 5% of people have been victims of personal fraud, with 124,000, or one-fifth, victims of identity fraud.

The Australian Federal Police's Australian High Tech Crime Centre (AHTCC) says identity theft from social networking sites is a growing problem and believes criminals obtain false identities for a range of crimes, including money laundering, drug trafficking and even terrorism.

Social networking is a term given to the various websites that encourage people to link up online, form friendships and exchange cyber-conversations. Popular sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Second Life, Twitter and Bebo are where users post photos, personal information and find long-lost friends.

The federal government is also concerned about the problem, and recently announced a new inquiry into cyber-crime and its impact on Australian consumers. The AHTCC estimates that identity crime could be costing $4 billion annually to the community.

Follow these simple tips to stay safe online.

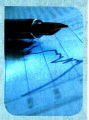
- Only reveal limited information in online profiles and don't include your address or private email.
- Use a webmail account for social networking sites.
- Check who can see your information by familiarising yourself with privacy/security settings.
- Use a long password with letters and numbers, and use different passwords for different sites.
- Never follow links in emails from unknown sources/generic addresses or any email urging you to update, restore or refresh your login or account details.
- Always type the website URL into a new browser window each time you log on to banking or financial sites.
- If you receive an email with an offer that sounds too good to be true – it is. Always.
- Confirm "personal" or "friendly" sounding emails from acquaintances independently. Phone them yourself or use a webmail account to send them an email to check.
- Report any scams or abuse that come in the name of a bank or company to the real organisation. ■

CAN YOU HELP? HOME & CONTENTS INSURANCE

If you have any interesting experiences with claiming on your home and contents insurance, we'd love to hear from you. We're especially interested if you were affected by fire or flood. Please write to the Money Team, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204 or send an email to money@choice.com.au.

In brief

Share-buying schemes



The federal government wants to protect consumers from predators who access the details of shareholders in publicly listed companies, then offer to buy their shares below market value. A consultation paper (www.treasury.gov.au, search for "Access to share registers") proposes measures including a cooling-off period for shareholders, a cigarette packet-style warning on offer documents and a "do not contact" register. The consultation runs until 24 July.

Nanofoods restricted

The European Parliament has proposed stringent new rules for foods produced using nanotechnology. Before these foods are allowed in European supermarkets they will have to undergo rigorous safety testing and manufacturers will be required to include and identify nanomaterials on the label. Unfortunately, Australia shows no sign of following suit.

Not so 'natural'

The ACCC is checking labelling claims on "natural" and organic cosmetics, and at least one brand, Natural Instinct, has been outed. It left off some ingredients and mismaned a potential skin irritant. The company said errors were made under previous management and labels have been changed. See How Safe are Your Cosmetics?, page 16.

CREDIT CARDS

Don't get bitten by the card sharks

While the cash rate has fallen dramatically, banks have hiked up some credit card interest rates. CHOICE explains how to use the system to your advantage.

Consumers are getting a raw deal on credit cards. At a time when more people are struggling with debt and relying on credit to see them through, banks are nudging up interest rates. Worse, people carrying debt on low-rate, no-frills cards have been hit hardest, with the average interest rate rising significantly over the past two years.

In July 2007, just before the credit crisis hit and the cash rate was 6.25%, low-rate credit cards charged on average 11.15% interest. By April 2009, despite the cash rate being at an historic low of 3%, credit card interest rates had risen to 12.05% on average for low-rate cards. In comparison, standard variable home loan rates came down from 8.05% to 5.75% in the same period.

Consumers who opted for low-rate cards to carry debt are being penalised – a dangerous trap, especially when unemployment is on the rise. But there are a number of cheaper card options available; for the five cheapest ongoing rates, see the table below.

LOW-RATE CREDIT CARDS

Institution / card (in order of interest rate)	Interest rate (%)*	Annual fee*	Free days*
mecu Low Rate Visa Credit Card	8.89	$59	0
Satisfac Credit Union Visa Credit Card S10	10.24	$10	55
Community First CU Low Rate Visa Credit Card	10.50	$40	55
Sydney Credit Union Visa Credit Card	10.64	$30	55
BankWest Lite MasterCard	10.75	$59	55
Bendigo Bank Basic Black Visa/MasterCard	10.75	$45	44
Heritage Building Society Visa Gold No Frills	10.75	$0	0

** Rates, fees and free days listed exclude introductory offers.*
Source: CANSTAR Cannex, 12 June 2009

HOW TO REPAY A $1000 CREDIT CARD DEBT

	Time to repay (months)	Total amount repaid
Minimum repayment only	239	$3034
Minimum repayment plus $50	19	$1148
Minimum repayment plus $200	5	$1045

For a card with 18.25% interest rate and $40 annual fee. Minimum repayments 2% or $10, whichever is higher. Calculations assume all fees are paid plus the regular amounts shown. Source: CANSTAR Cannex

Every dollar you pay off on your credit card makes a difference – if you do it wisely.

How to get out of credit card debt

You can make big savings by using the right card. Consider the difference in interest you'll pay with a rate of 9.85% or 16.25%. Making the minimum repayment plus $50 extra a month to clear a debt of $2500 means you'll save close to $300 in interest with the lower interest card. If you can't pay off your card in full each month, make sure you pay at least the minimum to avoid a penalty fee – usually about $35 – then try to make extra repayments.

Every extra dollar makes a difference. If you owe $1000, pay only the minimum each month and cop all the penalty fees, you'll pay more than $3000 across 20 years to clear the debt. Topping up your monthly payment with just an extra $50, however, will reduce total repayments to just $1148 across 19 months – see the table, left.

Low introductory rate cards

If you're confident you can pay back any accumulated debt within the introductory period, you could apply for a low introductory card and transfer your balance over to it. But you must use it only as a way to pay off your debt and not as a credit card for new purchases, as you will accrue more interest on these instead of paying off the debt at the lowest interest rate first. You also need to check the interest rate will not revert to a high rate once the introductory period is over. Also, find out how the annual fee compares against the interest saving. ■

CHOOSE THE RIGHT CARD

To compare more credit cards on the market, go to **www.choice.com.au/creditcards**. You'll find information on interest rates, annual fees and interest-free days as well as details of penalty fees and balance transfers.

APP STORE

Something for everyone

Access international and local applications for your iPhone or iPod Touch with this online one-stop shop.

The Apple App Store for the iPhone and iPod Touch has opened up the world to Australian software developers, providing a channel through which they can sell their applications across 77 countries. With more than a billion downloads in less than a year and more than 50,000 applications to choose from across dozens of categories, the App Store has been a resounding success. And for many Australian consumers, it's the local content that gives the App Store its real value.

Weather information and news are two obvious examples, but the App Store also has Australian applications to help you find local restaurants and cafes, maps, train timetables, postcodes and even the location of the nearest public toilet. You can also do your online banking on the go or find the location of your bank's nearest ATM. You can buy apps directly using the iPhone or iPod Touch, even without a PC. The iPhone connects via a phone network or Wi-Fi, while the iPod Touch uses only Wi-Fi. You can also search, browse and buy apps on your PC using Apple iTunes, then transfer them to an iPhone or iPod Touch. With rare exceptions, apps are either free or cost only a few dollars. Even more expensive business applications tend to be relatively cheap at under $15. It's important to check the program description and ratings on the App Store before buying, however, as some applications are just a mobile extension to a PC program, which you need for full functionality.

Apple App Store

★★★★☆

Price Free or low cost.

Apple's strict control of the App Store means that even though anyone can develop and submit a program, many apps will never see the light of day. Apple has already refused some apps which it deems "objectionable", although several applications have slipped through before being banned.

CHOICE VERDICT

The success of the Apple App Store has paved the way for others, including Google, Nokia and Vodafone, to launch their own online on-device stores. We can expect the growing competition in this area will ultimately give consumers more choice and better value products.

For more on the Apple App Store, see the Jul/Aug 2009 issue of *CHOICE Computer*. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 (toll-free) or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines. ■

POWER SAVER

Power saviour?

This gadget fails to live up to its claim to reduce your electricity bill.

The Micro-Plug Power Saver, which claims to reduce energy consumption by up to 30%, is a small box that plugs into a power socket. You then plug another appliance into the Micro-Plug, and it's supposed to start reducing the amount of electricity the appliance uses (without affecting its performance), thereby saving you money.

CHOICE put it to the test with a fridge, freezer, garden pump and vacuum cleaner, and used a laboratory power meter to measure the kilowatts (kW) drawn with and without the Micro-Plug. Sadly, there was no difference. We also tested with a drill, and recorded only a small saving of 5% – hardly enough to warrant the $150 price tag.

We contacted the distributor, who claimed we hadn't tested correctly and that some of our appliances were too powerful or not powerful enough to get any benefit, even though the appliances we used are all regular domestic models. The distributors also said our fridge's compressor (responsible for most of its power usage) might not have run during our test. However, we ran the fridge for 23 hours with the Micro-Plug, and again for 23 hours without it.

In the past, similar power-saving claims have been made for other gadgets. Manufacturers of such products often base their claim on correcting power factor, which is only significant for large industrial and commercial installations. Domestic electricity bills are based on kilowatt hours (kWh) used, not power factor, and we can't see any evidence of the Micro-Plug making a difference there. There are more effective ways to reduce your electricity bills, such as choosing more energy-efficient appliances, using them less and switching them off when possible, rather than leaving them on standby.

MICRO-PLUG
Power Saver PS2B

★☆☆☆☆

Price $150
Contact www.reegen.com.au

CHOICE VERDICT

There may be circumstances in which the Micro-Plug reduces the electricity an appliance uses. But given this unit is connectable to just one appliance, and electricity only costs about 17c/kWh, it would still take several years to recoup the $150 outlay. ■

QUAD STROLLER

Four's company

This quad stroller is great in theory but disappointing in practice.

Transporting four toddlers can be a labour worthy of Hercules. CHOICE hasn't tested a four-seat stroller before, but when we saw the ABC Everest we couldn't resist, so we tested it for safety, stability and ease of use.

The Everest is a twin (side-by-side) stroller with a separate twin reclining toddler seat that connects to the top of the stroller frame, resulting in a two-tier arrangement. The stroller can also be used on its own as a normal twin stroller, and a single toddler seat is also available to make a three-seater. We tested the four-seat configuration only.

While the recommended retail is $1798, the distributor told us the average retail price is actually $1589.

- **Safety** The Everest passed most tests, but was let down by its brakes, which failed our standard test. These consist of a foot-operated bar that lowers against the rear wheels, and rely on friction to stop the wheels turning. Unfortunately they don't work very well; on a slight incline of about six degrees the brakes are unable to stop the loaded stroller from rolling away, and even on level ground it's possible (with some effort) to keep pushing the stroller after the brakes are applied. The stroller is now supplied with different tyres featuring a raised, knobbly tread (we didn't test these); these might improve the braking. Regardless of the tyres used, this braking mechanism is inferior to those found on most other strollers.
- **Stability** The stroller passed the standard stability test, but tended to tip when we put it on a slight incline with the bottom seats empty and top seats loaded. If you buy this stroller, do not put children in the top seats while the bottom seats are empty.
- **Ease of use** The harnesses are generally easy to adjust and fasten, the handle height and length is adjustable and folding/unfolding is easy enough (but mind your fingers while doing this; as on many strollers, there are places where a carelessly placed finger could get a painful pinch), although the top seats must be removed first before folding. However, due to the stroller's size and weight, you would need a large car boot to fit it even when folded.

The bottom storage basket is hard to access. While the stroller moves around easily when empty, it's heavy and difficult to get through doorways and up or down stairs once fully loaded. We found the front swivel wheels can sometimes lock together if you change from pushing the stroller forward to pulling it backwards or vice versa. We also found the instructions unclear about the maximum load for the stroller plus toddler seats. The total load for the stroller in either configuration is 70kg; 35kg each for the stroller seats without the twin toddler seat attached, but with the seat attached it's 25kg total for the (upper) toddler seat and 45kg total for the (lower) stroller seats. There's also a lower basket and pocket that take 5kg and 300g each, for an overall maximum load of 75.3kg.

The distributor disagreed with our results and told us the stroller had passed their brake and stability tests, but conceded they are improving the instructions.

ABC Everest quad buggy

★★☆☆☆

Price $1798 ($1299 for twin stroller plus $499 for twin toddler seat)
Suitable for Up to four children with total weight 70kg
Contact www.gobubbago.com.au

CHOICE VERDICT

A fully loaded quad stroller is always going to be bulky and challenging to push around compared with a single-seater, and the Everest is no exception. If this were its only drawback we'd say it's worth considering, but as tested, its brakes are inadequate, so we don't recommend it. ■

Coming

Chest freezers

Bulk-buying your perishables for long-term storage is one way to tighten your economic belt. While chest freezers are more energy-efficient than upright freezers, our latest test shows their ease of use still leaves much to be desired.

Washing machines

Whether you're in the market for a top- or front-loading machine, you're likely to find yourself overwhelmed by the marketing jargon from sales staff and manufacturers alike. We cut through the turgid terminology to outline, in plain English, what to look out for.

Landline phones

You can save on message bank service fees by opting for a cordless landline phone with a built-in answering machine. And with some models in our test costing more than three times as much as others, you can save even more by discovering which cheaper models we recommend.

Email or write – we want to hear from you.

Your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. See opposite for how to contact us.

Sugar-coating reality?

I'm concerned about your recent analysis of breakfast cereals (*CHOICE*, May 2009), as it appears you didn't take into account that the two cereals topping your list of recommended kids' cereals are often drowned in sugar, anyway.

When I was young, my friends who ate Weet-Bix put about half a centimetre of raw sugar on top. I recently spent the weekend with some friends and their kids, and saw them do exactly the same – nothing has changed in 20 years. The kids who ate Nutri-Grain added no sugar, but the kids who chose Weet-Bix coated them in sugar.

Personally, I'd prefer my children eat a bowl of Sultana Bran than a bowl of sugar-coated Weet-Bix. I think you should consider eating habits when rating cereals.
Samuel, via email

CHOICE says *We regard fibre as the most important attribute of a breakfast cereal, and the cereals in our story were ranked in order of fibre content. Adding sugar to a cereal like Weet-Bix is something you can choose to do or not. However, when the sugar is part of the cereal – as it is in Nutri-Grain – you have no choice. And adding some sugar is OK: a teaspoon of sugar is only about 4g – much less than the amount of sugar manufacturers put into some of these cereals.*

Loyalty liabilities

Your story on credit and charge card loyalty schemes (*CHOICE*, April 2009) simplified a complex issue for many consumers. Your two basic rules for successful use of these cards are spot-on – repay the balance each month and spend big to get the most benefit.

Another tip is not to pay any surcharge to use your card unless it is less than the value of the points obtained, or the points are needed urgently to qualify for a reward. Many businesses and government agencies issue a surcharge for using a credit card, especially those other than Visa and MasterCard. The average value of a point is about one cent, so any surcharge above 1% of the price is generally not a good deal, especially if the card only provides half a point per dollar spent. Consumers need to be alert to surcharges, otherwise they will get even less value from loyalty schemes.
Ian Jarratt, via email

CHOICE says *Merchant fees are a percentage of credit card transactions charged by the scheme operators to merchants, and are currently 0.8% for MasterCard and Visa, 2.03% for American Express and 2.13% for Diners Club. Since 2003, merchants have been allowed to pass on these fees to customers through a credit card surcharge. Some merchants do this, usually on high-value transactions, but most choose not to surcharge their customers or accept certain card schemes.*

CHOICE has been a key advocate over the past decade for reform of merchant fees and in 2003 successfully argued for a major overhaul of the merchant fees, which saw some fees reduce by nearly half. We're also working to ensure credit cards have fair and transparent fees and interest rates.

Gongs for *CHOICE Computer*

I have just received my first copy of *CHOICE Computer* and I'm extremely pleased, to say the least. What a refreshing change to read a magazine without ads and other guff. The content is interesting, up to date, well written and presented, and most importantly (for me anyway) easily understandable.
Ken Meredith, via email

CHOICE says *Thanks for your feedback – it's good to know we're fulfilling our goal of providing clear and relevant information to our readers. And you're not alone in singing the praises of* CHOICE Computer. *At the IT Journalism Awards held in April this*

Thumbs up!

- Jelena Popovic of Putney, NSW, tells us that after her husband accidentally sat on her Maui Jim sunglasses, she took the mangled pair back to the retailer she'd bought them from 18 months earlier for a quote to get them fixed. She was astounded, yet delighted, when Maui Jim simply replaced them – at no charge.
- Kath M. of Kogarah, NSW, told us it took three Microsoft telephone customer service team technicians more than two hours to help her get her headset software working. They then followed it up with a courtesy call a few days later to check if it was still working properly – we think that's pretty impressive service, especially for a product that cost a modest $50.
- Peter Rutherford, of Eltham North, Victoria, says bumps in the road caused his five-year-old Garmin car GPS unit to keep resetting itself. Well out of warranty, he sent it in for repair and Garmin replaced the unit at no charge.
- Samantha Kosky of Camperdown, NSW, was expecting to pay a $25 service fee to see if her defunct 10-year-old Moulinex blender could be repaired. But, when she rocked up to the Groupe SEB service centre in Sydney, the representative gave her an ex-demonstrator model of the latest blender at no cost, advising her to hang on to the old one and then ring in occasionally to see if a replacement motor becomes available.

Address your letters to ***Thumbs up!*** *at the address opposite.*

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Give traffic lights the green light

Thank you for the useful information on www.choice.com.au concerning food labelling. I agree it is an urgent issue, as food companies seem to be pushing ahead with their own labelling systems and I don't think they can be trusted to put the health of consumers ahead of their own interests.

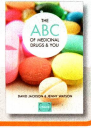
I'm pleased to see you have done some research that shows the traffic light system to be more effective than the %RDI approach. In my view, the percentage-per-100g system is inherently easier to understand. We are all familiar with this in regard to the fat percentage in chocolate products, cheese and milk products, and many other items. The concept of RDI is inherently complicated, as there's no consistency among product types. Furthermore, who decides on the specified serving size and how many consumers will take any notice of this anyway?

One advantage of this for the industry seems to be that it's less transparent to the consumer – so why should the government listen to industry on this matter when they have such a strong conflict of interest?

Olivia Murray, via email

CHOICE says *The joint CHOICE and Cancer Council front of pack labelling research has already got the food industry buzzing, with the Australian Food and Grocery Council (AFGC) accusing CHOICE of confusing the debate over food labelling. In reality, it's just the opposite. We are calling for one mandatory food labelling system that helps the greatest number of consumers make healthier choices. It's understandable the AFGC wants to protect a labelling system in which they've already invested resources, but if governments really want food labels that benefit consumers they need to choose the system that helps the greatest number of consumers, not the one that causes least offence to the food industry.*

Letter of the Month This month's winner receives *The ABC of medicinal drugs & you*, or any other book of her choice at www.choice.com.au/books. We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all the emails and letters we receive. When they appear in the magazine, we may edit them or print only an extract.



Email ausconsumer@choice.com.au or mail to:
Letters, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204

year, CHOICE Computer *took top honours in the award for Best Consumer Magazine, and journalist Rosalyn Page was awarded the prize for Best Consumer Technology Journalist. Editor Ashton Mills was Highly Commended in the Best Technical Journalist category. Congratulations to all the team. If you'd like to subscribe, visit www.choice.com.au/magazines.*

Super insured

Having recently tried to consolidate my superannuation and also that of one of my children, I would like to highlight what I consider a greater rip-off than multiple super funds with multiple administration fees. That is, life insurance premiums paid through super funds. In all the funds I was working with, life insurance premiums continued to be paid even when the person had ceased employment and was no longer contributing to the super fund until there were no longer sufficient funds to pay them – and only then did the meagre amount left ($12 in one case) get transferred to a "lost super fund" account.

Something ought to be done by super funds to cancel the life insurance component immediately a super fund becomes inactive, so funds are not eroded in this fashion.

Denise Mikula, via email

CHOICE says *Denise makes a great point and many people would not realise they're paying for this life insurance. Some have several life insurance policies and don't need all of them. On the other hand, many people are underinsured, and we wouldn't want policies to be automatically cancelled leaving people with no insurance. Similarly, a member who stops contributing to super may still want their insurance policy. It's generally a good idea to consolidate your super as much as possible. In doing so, consider what life insurance you actually want and need, and cancel any unnecessary policies.*

Enhanced confusion

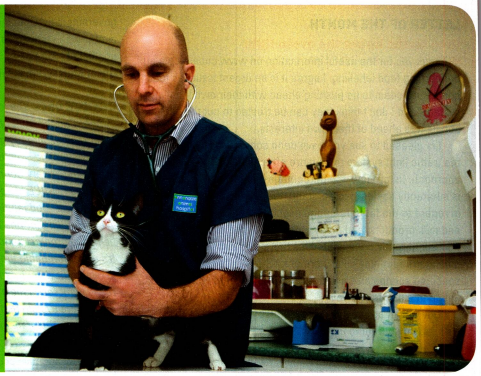
On the front of a packet of Tasty Jacks Salt and Vinegar chips it's claimed there are "no artificial flavours or colours". However, when I checked the ingredients list, I found it contains flavour enhancers 621 and 635. Both could have detrimental results for someone who reacts badly to these additives. How can they get away with making this claim?

Melissa Johnston, via email

CHOICE says *For regulatory purposes, "flavours" and "flavour enhancers" are two different things. Flavour enhancers 621 (monosodium glutamate) and 635 are blamed for various symptoms such as rashes, swelling of lips or tongue, cardiovascular effects and headaches. We suggest it's best not to rely on any "no-additive" claims – check the ingredients list for those additives that you may want to avoid.*

Paws for thought

Insurance can take the sting out of vet bills – but will your pet pay if you don't? CHOICE finds out.



nutshell

- CHOICE examined 63 pet insurance policies with premiums ranging from $100 to $610 per year per pet and different excess options.
- Pet insurance can cover your cat or dog against accidents such as bone fractures, illnesses such as cancer and for routine treatments such as worming and vaccinations.

Mickey, a beagle, had always been accident-prone. If it wasn't broken bones, it would be mysterious lumps popping up. His owner Polly, from Brisbane, took out pet insurance after paying about $1500 for 15 vet visits in the first 12 months after acquiring him. Later, Mickey needed specialist cruciate ligament (knee) surgeries. Then late last year, he was found to have malignant tumours and had to be put down. Over the 10 years of his life, vet bills totalled about $16,500, of which the insurance covered 80%.

If your cherished pet has an accident or falls ill, veterinary bills can be expensive. Medical treatments for pets are nearly as advanced as those for humans – and come with a price tag to match. Pet insurance underwriter Hollard reports average claims of $1380 for treating multiple fractures and $780 for a snake bite – see Treatment Costs table, opposite.

Pet insurance is in its infancy in Australia, with fewer than 2% of cats and dogs insured and only three underwriters offering insurance products. However, the industry is growing and last year a range of new brands and policies entered the market.

Pet insurance is not a straightforward product. In our investigation, CHOICE analysed 63 policies and found complicated exclusions and cover conditions, as well as big differences in cover and price between policies. The table on page 14 outlines the best deals for different levels of cover.

What's covered?

The main types of pet insurance policies are for accidents only and accident plus illness. You can add cover for routine care, such as worming and vaccinations. Some policies include additional cover for such things as emergency boarding when the owner is ill, death of the pet from injury or illness or if the pet is stolen or goes missing.

Annual premiums range from $113 to $614 for dogs and $101 to $554 for cats, usually with a discount if two or more pets are insured. Policyholders can save on the premium by accepting an excess, usually ranging from $100 to $500 per condition or accident (not claim) per year, or by choosing a policy that covers only a percentage of the cost.

Did you know?

Pet cover with your home and contents insurance

CHOICE found a number of home and contents insurers that offer pet cover.

- Allianz, Apia, Australian Unity, CGU, HBA, Mutual Community and TIO include pet cover.
- GIO, RAA, RACQ and Suncorp offer pet cover for an extra fee on top of the premium.

Cover is very limited, usually only applying to accidents, and may be restricted to road accidents. Illnesses are covered only by RAA and RACQ. Policies usually cover vet expenses up to $500 only, although Apia offers up to $1000 and GIO/Suncorp Platinum up to $2000.

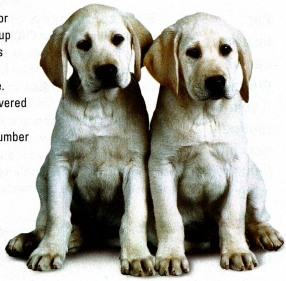
Annual benefit limits range from $4800 to $18,000. Some of the brands have capped annual benefits for hospitalisation, radiology, medication or skin conditions ranging from $1100 to $1600, while some have limits for tick paralysis, ranging from $500 to $4000. Tick paralysis is a problem on the eastern seaboard and, while treatment costs wouldn't normally exceed $500, in a worst-case scenario your pet could be on life support for days and the costs could exceed $10,000. You can reduce the chance of your pet needing tick treatment by checking it regularly and applying tick control products.

What's not covered?

The minimum age of an insurable pet is usually eight weeks. The maximum age for taking out accident and illness cover is usually between four and nine years, and there's no age limit for accident-only cover. As cover for pre-existing conditions is excluded, it's a good idea to take out cover early. Make sure you choose the right policy, as any conditions already diagnosed may not be covered by the new policy should you switch.

The biggest trap we found is limited cover for older pets. Vet bills usually start to mount when your pet ages, which is why insurers reduce their cover for older pets. This can mean a higher premium or cover reduced to a percentage of the bill: for example, Petplan covers only 65% of the bills for pets 10 years and older.

Illnesses that can persist for years, such as diabetes and cancer, also often attract capped limits. The other policies in our Best Buys table, all of them underwritten by Hollard, limit the lifetime benefit for any condition to the annual limit set in the first year the condition occurs. If the amount is $8000, for example, once you use up the money – whether it's in the first year or over several years – it's gone. Your pet is no longer covered for this condition.



Insurers require a number of vaccinations, usually those recommended by vets in your area. They include hepatitis and parvovirus for dogs and feline infectious-enteritis, feline leukaemia and cat flu for cats. If your pet is not vaccinated it is excluded from cover for these conditions. Some policies exclude treatment for behavioural problems such as excessive barking. Dental work is normally only covered if caused by an accident.

Depending on the policy you choose, some dog breeds have an extra premium or conditions applied. For example, Petplan reduces the cover for selected breeds such as Rottweiler and Great Dane to 65% once the dog turns seven. >

38 million pets in total are kept by Australians – close to two pets per person. This includes about 3.8 million dogs, 2.4 million cats, 20 million fish and nine million birds.

TREATMENT COSTS

Condition (in order of average claim)	Average claim ($)	Highest claim ($)
Multiple fractures	1,381	13,525
Pneumonia	940	2226
Cataracts	884	1836
Snake bite	784	3594
Cancer	770	5371
Gastroenteritis	286	3687
Diabetes	267	2167
Urinary tract infection	256	861

Source: *Hollard; sample of pet insurance claims reported for various conditions 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008. Figures include the cost of medicines, vet fees and other associated expenses.*

Shasta and the snake

Shasta, a four-year-old Russian Blue mix, developed urinary tract infections – a typical illness experienced by desexed male cats. Two surgeries cost his owner, Tara from Queensland, a total of $3500. A few months later, Shasta was bitten by a snake and needed to stay at the vet clinic for a day. Tara tried to take out pet cover with her home and contents insurer but found it wasn't offered.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TARA

Pet insurance can be worthwhile if your cat routinely gets into fights with other cats or your dog is prone to illness.

< How to choose a policy

Accident & illness cover CHOICE believes policies covering illness and accidents are best value, which is why we've selected policies for three different cover levels: excess of $500, up to $300 and $100 (see the table, below). You won't be able to get a benefit for many less costly treatments if you take a policy with a high excess, however these policies are more affordable and still offer good protection and peace of mind if your pet gets seriously injured or becomes ill and needs expensive treatments.

$186 The average cost of annual vet bills per dog per year; $99 is the average cost per cat per year.

Accident and illness plus routine treatment cover Policies with routine treatment as an add-on cover usually cost about $110 more per year, with a maximum benefit amount of about $150, so they are more a budgeting tool than insurance. We think it makes more sense to pay for routine vet visits, such as your pet's annual vaccination, from your own pocket and take out accident and illness cover. However, these policies seem to be popular so we've selected the best value ones (see Using the Table, opposite).

Accident-only cover Taking out a policy against accidents means you won't be covered if your pet falls ill. While these policies are cheaper, it may be worthwhile considering instead an accident and illness cover with a higher excess for a similar premium.

PET INSURANCE BEST BUYS

Plan (in order of cheapest premium for first dog, within cover categories)	Annual premium for first dog ($)	Annual premium for first cat ($)	Excess ($)	100% cover (after excess)	Multipet discount (from)*	Maximum age to commence cover (years)	Annual benefit ($)
ACCIDENT & ILLNESS COVER							
Budget Cover – $500 excess							
Bow Wow Meow Major Medical Plan	135	135	500	√	2	9	8000
Pet Insurance Australia Major Medical Pet Insurance Cover	170	150	500	√	2	9	15,000
Standard Cover – up to $300 excess							
Petsecure Accident Cover & Illness Cover	268	167	300	√	2	9	10,500
Pet Insurance Australia Accidental Injury + Illness Cover	331	241	250	√	2	9	15,000
1300Insurance Pet Protect Comprehensive Protect	355	254	250	√	2	9	15,000
Top Cover – $100 excess							
Petplan Supreme Cat	(B)	295	100	√	3	8	12,000
Pet Insurance Australia Accidental Injury + Illness Cover	409	307	100	√	2	5	15,000
1300Insurance Pet Protect Comprehensive Protect	440	329	100	√	2	5	15,000
Medibank Private Silver Paw Cover	446	324	100	√	2	4	12,000
Petplan Standard Dog	466	(B)	100	√	3	8	14,000
ACCIDENT, ILLNESS & ROUTINE CARE COVER (A)							
Pet Insurance Australia Major Medical Cover + Routine Care	284	264	500	√	2	9	15,000
Pet Insurance Australia Accidental Injury + Illness Cover + Routine Care	445	355	250	√	2	9	15,000
Pet Insurance Australia Accidental Injury + Illness Cover + Routine Care	523	421	100	√	2	5	15,000
ACCIDENT-ONLY COVER							
Pet Insurance Australia Accidental Injury Cover	143	131	250	√	2	No max	8000
Medibank Private Bronze Paw Cover	169	150	200	√	2	No max	8000
Pet Insurance Australia Accidental Injury Cover	192	180	100	√	2	No max	8000

Is pet insurance worth it?

If your cat routinely gets into fights with other cats or your dog is prone to illnesses, pet insurance can take the stress out of expensive vet bills. Considering the high costs for complicated specialist treatments, pet insurance can offer value for money and give you peace of mind that you can afford the best treatment for your pet.

The most serious trap with pet insurance is the reduced or capped cover for older pets and those pets with chronic diseases. This means that if you really need it your pet may not be fully covered. Given the small percentage of pet owners opting for insurance, we believe pet insurance could be better value and accessible to more people if the policies were less restrictive. ■

CONTACTS – RECOMMENDED POLICIES

- 1300Insurance Pet Protect, 1300 467 872, www.1300Insurance.com.au
- Bow Wow Meow, 1800 668 502, www.bowwow.com.au/petinsurance
- Medibank Private, 13 23 31, www.medibank.com.au/petinsurance
- Pet Insurance Australia, 1800 043 552, www.petinsuranceaustralia.com.au
- Petsecure, 1300 855 160, www.petsecure.com.au
- Petplan, 1300 738 225, www.petplan.com.au

92% of pet owners feel "very close" to their pet – 93% feel "very satisfied" with their pet.

Source: National People and Pets Survey, 2006

for life of pet ($)	Full cover for older pets	Benefit limit for tick paralysis ($)	Emergency boarding per year ($)	Death from injury / illness ($)	Theft / straying ($)
	✓	500	500		
00	✓	500	500		
00	(C)	500	1000		
00	✓	500	500		
00	✓	500	500		
imit	(D)	No limit	1000	1000	2000
00	✓	500	500		
00	✓	500	500		
00	✓	1000	1000		
imit	(D)	No limit	1000	1000 (E)	1000
00	✓	500	500		
00	✓	500	500		
00	✓	500	500		
	✓		500		
	✓		500		
	✓		500		

USING THE TABLE

CHOICE looked at 63 different policy and pricing options and picked the best deals. We compared policies on price and cover features, including annual premium, excess level, cover level, annual benefit amount and cover restrictions for older and chronically ill pets.

TABLE NOTES

** Check how the discount applies – Petplan gives a 10% discount on all pets from three pets upwards, whereas other policies may only give a 5% discount on the additional pet.*

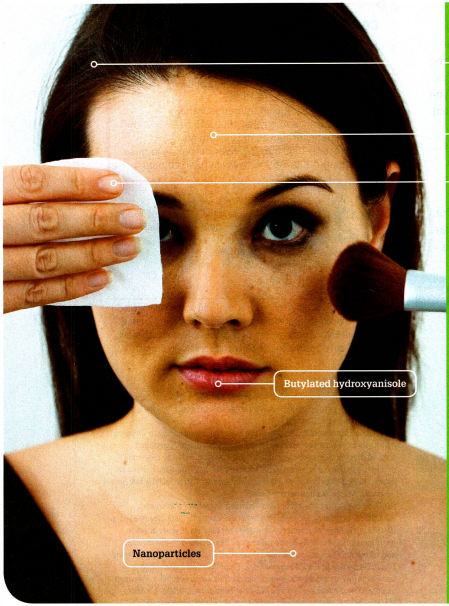
(A) Routine care covers $90 for one of the following: desexing, micro-chipping, heartworm preventative medication, teeth cleaning, council registration fees, alternative therapies, prescription diets, dewclaw removal, cremation or burial, dog training at a recognised training centre; $30 for vaccinations or health check; $10 for heartworm test or blood screen; $10 for FeLv/Fiv test or urinalysis; $45 for flea/tick/worm control.

(B) This policy is not one of our recommended options for this animal.

(C) 100% for accident claims and 80% for illness claims for pets over five years.

(D) 65% of treatment costs are covered when pet reaches 10 years or seven years for restricted breeds: bandog, Boerboel, Beauceron, Bernese mountain dog, all bulldogs (miniature, American, Australian, English), bull arab, deerhound, Dogue De Bordeaux, Estrela mountain dog, Great Dane, Irish wolfhound, Leonberger, all mastiff breeds, Newfoundland, Old English sheepdog, Pyrenean mountain dog, Rottweiler, Shar Pei, St Bernard and crosses of these breeds.

(E) Only for death from illnesses; death from accidents not covered.



How safe are your cosmetics?

Claims are rife that personal care products are full of carcinogens and other toxic chemicals. Is this scaremongering or fact? CHOICE investigates.

nutshell

- Many groups and companies have helped create fear over chemical ingredients in cosmetics.
- Based on current knowledge, most cosmetic use, as directed, is safe.

There is a plethora of websites listing chemicals to avoid in cosmetics, some with convincing reasons for doing so, such as cancer, infertility and general toxicity. The sheer number of these lists, littered with references to professors, government departments and scientific papers, makes the warnings all the more plausible.

We learn, for example, that the surfactant sodium lauryl sulphate "poses serious health threats" and "is used in car washes, as garage floor cleaners and engine degreasers", while diethanolamine (DEA) is "restricted in Europe" but commonly used in skin care products and has caused "a major increase in liver and kidney cancer". Propylene glycol is so toxic that the US Environment Protection Authority "requires workers to wear protective gloves, clothing and goggles" and "warns against skin contact to prevent consequences such as brain, liver and kidney abnormalities".

Yet all these and other chemicals are lurking in our personal care products, apparently considered safe by the authorities that regulate such things – even though many haven't been thoroughly tested. With certain medical conditions inexplicably on the increase, and emerging research finding dangerous effects from chemicals at previously untested low levels (see Challenging Assumptions in Toxicology Testing, page 19), it's not surprising people are worried.

CHOICE looks at some of the chemicals found in cosmetics sold in Australia that have been banned or restricted in other countries, or otherwise give cause for concern.

Focus chemicals and where you'll find them

As a starting point, we used a database compiled by the US-based Environmental Working Group (EWG) which uses government databases and peer-reviewed literature to assess more than 8000 ingredients and 40,000 products for safety. Ingredients are rated from one to 10, where one is low hazard and 10 is high hazard. Most of the substances we looked at are rated 10 out of 10. Others are included because they have been banned in certain countries. After identifying brands and products known to contain these chemicals, we hit the shops.

On the upside, we found many of the major international brands no longer contain any of the more dubious ingredients – formulations have changed since the EWG database was last updated. In the globalised marketplace, there's little sense in producing different formulations such that a banned or restricted chemical is used in products to be sold in countries that allow it, but not others. As a result, the once-common dibutyl phthalate, toluene, butylated hydroxyanisole and petroleum distillates have all but disappeared from big brand nail polishes, lipsticks and mascaras.

However, beyond these international brands the findings were less reassuring. As well as supermarkets, department stores and chemists, we looked in ethnic grocers and two-dollar shops and found examples of cosmetics made in Australia, Asia and the Middle East that contain chemicals banned or restricted elsewhere. Of concern, too, was the number of products without ingredients listed, particularly skin whiteners, henna for tattoos and certain eye make-up products that are sometimes found to contain heavy metals (lead and mercury) or other problem chemicals.

Did you know?

Labelling laws All cosmetic products must be labelled with ingredients so consumers can check for allergens or other ingredients to which they may react. The listing must appear either on the product packaging, or on pamphlets or display panels near the product at point of sale. Premium products often come with lots of packaging, so labelling is fairly straightforward. Cheaper products available in supermarkets are usually blister-packed on cardboard, which allows room for ingredient information. In chain department stores such as Target, Kmart and Priceline, where products are sold without additional packaging, you'll find pamphlets or cards listing ingredients near the products (it's difficult, for example, to legibly print all the ingredients onto a tube of lipstick). In bargain stores and two-dollar shops, you may not always find any sort of labelling at all.

Who regulates cosmetics?

Cosmetics sold in Australia are regulated by the National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme (NICNAS), a division of the Department of Health and Ageing. Its role is to assess the safety of chemicals new to Australia and existing chemicals if reason for concern arises. Anyone importing or manufacturing cosmetic ingredients or products must be registered with NICNAS. Products must comply with certain legislative requirements, including labelling of ingredients, which is overseen by the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (see Did You Know?, below).

International bodies with a say in cosmetics formulation and regulation include the **Cosmetic Ingredient Review (CIR)**, a US-based panel that reviews and assesses cosmetic ingredients and publishes the findings in peer-reviewed scientific literature. It's supported by the Food and Drug Administration and funded by industry, but has no regulatory clout. California has a law, **Proposition 65**, under which known carcinogens and other dangerous substances must be listed on products containing them, along with a warning label, making them rather unattractive for consumers. Cosmetics in Europe must comply with the **Cosmetics Directive**, overseen by a panel of independent experts. **Health Canada** publishes a hotlist of ingredients that are banned or restricted in cosmetics. The Ministry of Health and Welfare in Japan has established the **Standards for Cosmetics**, which lists banned and restricted ingredients.

Many chemicals used in cosmetics can be dangerous under certain conditions, which is why it's important to put them in perspective.

Putting chemicals in perspective

Almost all cancers can be attributed to known carcinogens and carcinogenic lifestyles, such as tobacco, alcohol, sun, excessive red and processed meats, lack of fruit and vegetables, obesity, bacteria, viruses and lack of exercise.

Yet with so many people getting cancer these days, not to mention the apparent increase in fertility problems, allergies, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, chronic fatigue syndrome and other modern-day maladies, you can't help but wonder about man-made chemicals in our food, >

Nail hardeners
Some contain **dibutyl phthalate (DBP)** – banned in Europe as an endocrine disrupting chemical.

Nail polish
Some contain **toluene** – considered unsafe for use in cosmetics by the International Fragrance Association, because of its liver toxicity risk.

Mineral make-up
Some contain **nanoparticles** – new chemicals; safety is unknown.

< homes and the environment. Given the ubiquity of their use, it's easy to blame ingredients in cosmetics. Many substances haven't been well studied, and there are vested interests on both sides ensuring the message about the safety or danger of chemicals gets maximum – and credible – airplay.

The US-based health and environment advocacy coalition, Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, is lobbying to get the personal care products industry to phase out use of chemicals linked to cancer, birth defects and other serious health concerns, and replace them with safer alternatives – already with some successes.

Should you be worried?

Many chemicals used in personal care products are dangerous in high concentrations, high dose (when administered to laboratory animals) and industrial quantities. Some people may also suffer an allergic reaction to the smaller quantities, such as you'd find in personal care products.

The various websites that warn about chemicals in cosmetics often refer to hazards and warnings in the chemicals' material safety data sheets (MSDS). Each chemical's MSDS provides information about its properties, how to handle it, all possible hazards (accidents, prolonged exposure and so on) and how to deal with them. They can be easily found by searching for both the chemical name and MSDS online. However, MSDSs aren't targeted at consumers; they're relevant for people who work with industrial quantities of concentrated chemicals, not those who use them in diluted and very small quantities.

Many warnings also relate to the effects of large doses of chemicals on lab animals, typically rats and mice, which aren't a reliable prediction of the effects small doses will have on humans. For example, substances that cause cancer in mice don't necessarily cause it in rats and vice versa. Human beings also live more complex lives, exposing ourselves to food, lifestyle and environmental factors that may increase or decrease the carcinogenic potential of a given substance. Conversely, however, substances safe for lab animals may be dangerous for humans.

Many of the websites providing this information have a vested interest in scaring consumers. They're often selling so-called "natural" products that claim not to contain dangerous chemicals, or books highlighting the dangers of common cosmetics. Some scientists seeking more funding have also been accused of disseminating doubt, essentially scaring money out of people for further research.

Hair colour restorers
Some contain **lead acetate** – banned in Europe and Canada. It appears to be safe when used as directed.

Sunscreens
Some contain **nanoparticles** – new chemicals; safety is unknown.

Lipsticks
Some contain **BHA** – on the banned and restricted fragrances list in Europe. Classified as carcinogenic under California's Proposition 65 law.

Baby wipes
Some contain:
DMDM hydantoin – banned in Japan for use in products that aren't washed away.
Iodopropynyl butylcarbamate – restricted use in Japan and Europe.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS IN TOXICITY TESTING

In the field of toxicology it's often held that the dose makes the poison – that is, larger doses have a stronger and/or faster effect than smaller ones. When scientists seek to find the dose at which a substance becomes toxic or lethal, they'll often start with reasonably high doses and, if necessary, work backwards to find safe doses – where there's no difference between the test and control animals.

However, over the last decade we've seen increasing evidence that very low doses of certain chemicals have an equally potent effect as high doses – much more so than a "medium" dose. The effect may be the same as the high-dose effect, where an intermediate dose shows no effect. Or, the effect may be different but equally problematic: for example, pregnant mice given large doses of an oestrogenic drug called diethylstilbestrol have extremely skinny offspring, while very low doses produce obese offspring.

Chemicals already found to have a low-dose effect include phthalates (banned in European toys and cosmetics), bisphenol A (being phased out or banned in North America) and pesticides such as endosulfan (banned in Europe, NZ and many other countries). These chemicals are still considered safe by Australian authorities, yet it's becoming increasingly apparent substances assumed safe should be going back to the test lab for review.

Dermatology and toxicology experts CHOICE spoke to agreed that based on current knowledge, cosmetics ingredients in the marketplace are safe to use as directed. "These chemicals are used in very small quantities and some, like shampoos and so on, for only a very short period of time," says Dr Rosemary Nixon, from the Australasian College of Dermatologists. "Cosmetic products are defined by their temporary effects and inability to change our body's physiology. Very little, if any, of the product would be able to penetrate the outer layer of the skin."

In the future, when these chemicals have been in use for many decades and/or more rigorous studies have been conducted, some long-term detrimental effects may be discovered for ingredients currently accepted as safe (see Challenging Assumptions in Toxicology Testing, left). For now, in the absence of good evidence of harm, consumers need to decide for themselves whether the benefits of using products containing these ingredients outweigh any potential risks and whether these risks are greater than the known lifestyle-related risks mentioned above. Buying major international brands or at least steering clear of products without an ingredients list is your best bet if you are concerned. ■

Anti-dandruff shampoos
Some contain **coal tar** – banned in Europe and Canada. It's a known carcinogen, but appears to be safe when used as directed in shampoos.

Aerosol hair products
Some contain:
DMDM hydantoin – CIR advice is it's not safe for use in aerosol products.
Iodopropynyl butylcarbamate – banned in aerosols in Japan. CIR advice is it's not safe for use in aerosol products.

Potatoes on ice

Chips, fries or wedges can be handy to keep in the freezer. However, some potato shapes that appeal to kids don't make the nutritional grade.

nutshell

- Frozen mashed potato and roast potatoes come at a premium price and rarely taste as good as the real thing.
- You can buy healthier chips or wedges but many products, particularly those favoured by kids, are heavy on salt and fat.

Homemade chips, it seems, are a thing of the past. Supermarket freezers not only stock crinkle cut, chunky cut, beer-battered, shoestring and slab-cut chips, but there are wedges, fries and novelty shapes, as well as roasted and mashed potatoes. But what is the true cost of this convenience?

CHOICE found some nutritional improvements since we last looked at frozen potato products in 2003. However, while mashed and roasted potatoes save you time, they rarely live up to the real thing – and you pay a premium for them (see Convenience Costs, opposite). And when it comes to novelty shapes, such as potato jewels, pommes and curly fries, which kids like, some are among the least healthy. To see how other children's foods rate, go to www.choicefoodforkids.com.au.

Some frozen potato products are still kilojoule-laden and salty; it may come as no surprise that hash browns won't be labelled "healthy" any time soon. And some of the worst offenders are those bite-sized novelty products that are particularly appealing to kids.

On the upside, saturated fat is now less of an issue, thanks to many manufacturers shifting from using beef fat to the more heart-friendly unsaturated fats. On the whole, when eaten in moderation and teamed with other vegetables, frozen chips can contribute to a nutritious, healthy meal. So it's handy to have a bag of chips or wedges in the freezer, and there are some reasonably healthy options out there – you just need to be selective (see the table, page 22).

A big fat improvement

Given that hot chips are commonly thought of as belonging to the fatty, fast food category, you might be pleasantly surprised to know there are no red lights for fat for any of these products – you can even find some with as little as 2.6% total fat. But the type of fat is just as important, and this is where the improvement lies.

When we last looked at frozen potato products, most were cooked in artery-clogging saturated fat, usually beef fat (tallow). Palm oil can also bump up the saturated fat, so if you're watching your intake check for both these items in the ingredients list (palm oil may simply be listed as "vegetable oil"). Today, the majority of products instead contain healthier monounsaturated or polyunsaturated fats such as canola or sunflower oil.

To benefit from this improvement, be sure to use a cooking method, such as oven bake, grill or microwave, that doesn't require you to add fat. All but one of the products we looked at provide instructions for at least one of these methods. It's recommended you deep-fry Woolworths Select Potato Wedges in oil, which is the only reason this product didn't make it onto our What to Buy list (opposite).

Kids pay nutritional price

The saturated fat content of potato products may have improved, but the same can't be said for salt, with more than half the products having an amber light for sodium. And it's the products kids are most likely to clamour for that are among the most heavily salted. The worst culprits are Seasons Pride Curly Fries, McCain Potato Nuggets and McCain Hash Browns – the recommended serve of each contains about one-third of the upper level of acceptable daily sodium intake for four- to eight-year-olds. Worse still, seven of the eight novelty potato products in our table are in the top 20 for fat. And all five hash brown products make it into the top 10.

As a general rule of thumb, novelty potato products and hash browns tend to be heavy on salt and/or fat, so have them as occasional treats only. Oven chips and wedges are usually a healthier option. >

What to buy

These products have a green light for both saturated fat and sodium.

Chips and fries	Price / kg
Lowest kJ	
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Chips in Beer Batter	$4.65
Lowest saturated fat	
McCain Super Fries Chunky Cut	$3.40
Lowest sodium	
Seasons Pride Straight Cut Chips (ALDI)	$2.00

Wedges	Price / kg
Lowest kJ and saturated fat	
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Wedges in Beer Batter	$4.65
Lowest saturated fat	
McCain Healthy Choice Country Style Wedges	$4.10
Lowest sodium	
Seasons Pride Rustic Wedges (ALDI)	$3.60

Roast
None to recommend

Mash
None to recommend

Hash browns and novelty products
None to recommend

CONVENIENCE COSTS

The emergence of **frozen mashed potato** since our 2003 test was eye-opening, so CHOICE home economist, Fiona Mair, assessed this new product to see how it stacked up for taste and cost.

Frozen mashed potato can go from microwave to table in as little as 90 seconds (You'll Love Coles mash varieties), whereas making it from scratch (peeling, chopping, boiling, seasoning and mashing) can take a good deal longer. The frozen versions cost on average 55 cents per 125g serve, compared with 48 cents for the same size serve of our homemade mash. And the taste? Our home economist was unimpressed, commenting that overall the frozen mash tastes "nothing like the homemade version" with a texture she describes as "overbeaten".

The cooking time for frozen **roasted potatoes** can be as little as 14 minutes under the grill (McCain Mini Roasts), which beats our time for homemade roast spuds by about half an hour. In our taste test, frozen roast potatoes were tougher on the outside than the homemade version and all brands had a lot of odd shapes and sizes, causing uneven cooking. Frozen roasted potatoes cost us on average 59 cents per 125g serve. An equivalent serve of our homemade version – including the olive oil and salt – cost 48 cents, although you could save more money buying your potatoes in bulk.

To round off the taste test, our home economist also checked out microwaveable packs of raw **baby potatoes**, which are in the chilled vegetable section of your supermarket. Not surprisingly, they taste no different from when you microwave baby potatoes yourself – but you're paying $10/kg for the "convenience" of potatoes already in a container with a dab of butter on top. As our home economist commented, "Why bother?"

For our home economist's recipes and tips for making the perfect mashed, roast and steamed potatoes, go to www.choice.com.au/food and click on Recipes.

To get the most nutrition from frozen potato products be sure to cook them in a way that doesn't require you to add fat, such as grilling or oven bake.

CHOICE's nutritional traffic lights are based on the latest recommendations and dietary guidelines established by local and overseas health experts.

PRODUCT Brand (ranked by energy within categories)	Energy (kJ) / 100g	Saturated fat (g / 100g)	Sodium (mg / 100g)	% Potato	Price / kg ($)
CHIPS / FRIES					
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Monster Chips in Beer Batter	437	0.5	170	89	4.65
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Chips in Beer Batter	450	0.6	59	89	4.65
Woolworths Select Light Supreme Crunch Chips	466	0.3	200	96	3.30
Birds Eye Oven Bake Chips Chunky Steakhouse	491	0.4	61	96	3.50
Birds Eye Oven Bake Chips Homestyle	491	0.4	60	95	3.50
Black & Gold Crinkle Cut Potato Chips	496	2.0	58	96	2.55
McCain Super Fries Mum's Cut	500	0.5	75	95	3.40
You'll Love Coles Straight Cut	504	0.4	61	95	3.00
You'll Love Coles Steakhouse Cut	508	0.4	62	95	3.00
McCain Healthy Choice Chunky Cut	517	0.5	50	97	4.10
McCain Super Fries Chunky Cut	517	0.2	50	97	3.40
McCain Super Fries Rustic Slab Cut Skin-on Fries	518	0.5	50	97	3.40
Birds Eye Oven Bake Chips Crinkle Cut	519	0.5	62	95	3.50
McCain Healthy Choice Straight Cut	519	0.6	60	97	4.10
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Chips	526	0.5	255	88	4.30
You'll Love Coles Crinkle Cut	530	0.5	62	95	3.00
Woolworths Select Chunky Steakhouse Chips	548	0.3	40	97	3.00
WeightWatchers Oven Chips	550	0.4	200	96	4.00
Seasons Pride Café Series Beer Battered Wavelengths (ALDI)	552	1.9	30	87	4.00
Seasons Pride Café Series Thick Cut Chips (ALDI)	560	1.5	200	92	3.50
Home Brand Frozen Potato Chips Crinkle Cut (Woolworths)	569	0.5	40	96	2.00
Home Brand Frozen Potato Chips Straight Cut (Woolworths)	569	0.5	40	96	2.00
Woolworths Select Crinkle Cut Chips	569	0.5	40	96	3.00
Woolworths Select Straight Cut Chips	569	0.5	40	96	3.00
Woolworths Select Supreme Crunch Chips	569	0.5	200	96	3.30
Seasons Pride French Fries (ALDI)	574	0.7	18	95	2.00
Unger's Crinkle Cut French Fried Potatoes	590	0.2	376	ns	6.60
McCain Super Fries Extra Long French Fries	592	0.4	75	95	3.40
McCain Super Fries Straight Cut	592	0.4	75	95	3.40
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Shoestring Fries	605	0.6	373	83	4.30
Seasons Pride Straight Cut Chips (ALDI)	605	<1	<5	96	2.00
McCain Beer Batter Fish Shop Chips Crunchy Potato Chips	620	0.5	308	81	4.75
Birds Eye Oven Bake Chips French Fries	633	0.4	13	95	3.50
You'll Love Coles French Fries	633	0.4	13	95	3.00
Birds Eye Oven Bake Chips Seasoned Straight Cut	638	0.5	261	87	3.50
Woolworths Select French Fries	640	0.7	40	95	3.00
McCain Super Fries Crinkle Cut	642	0.4	60	95	3.40
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Crinkles	643	0.7	375	83	4.30
Black & Gold Straight Cut Potato Chips	650	2.0	59	96	2.40
Coles Smart Buy Straight Cut Chips	650	2.0	59	95	2.00
McCain Original Crunchy Potato Fries	666	0.8	350	87	4.75
McCain Beer Batter Steakfries Crunchy Potato Fries	679	0.6	308	85	4.75
McCain Beer Batter Thick & Chunky Crunchy Potato Fries	679	0.6	308	85	4.75
Seasons Pride Crinkle Cut Chips (ALDI)	681	0.5	21	96	2.00

PRODUCT Brand (ranked by energy within categories)	Energy (kJ/100g)	Saturated fat (g/100g)	Sodium (mg/100g)	% Potato	Price / kg ($)
CHIPS / FRIES					
McCain Super Fries Shoestring	717	2.0 ●	62 ●	93	3.40
McCain Beer Batter Crinkle Cut Crunchy Potato Fries	812	0.8 ●	385 ●	75	4.75
McCain Beer Batter Thin & Crispy Crunchy Potato Fries	812	0.8 ●	385 ●	75	4.75
GEMS / NOVELTIES					
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Potato Gems	639	0.6 ●	360 ●	91	4.00
You'll Love Coles Potato Royals	643	0.8 ●	136 ●	91	3.50
Birds Eye Potato Swirls	676	2.2 ●	298 ●	91	7.00
Seasons Pride Potato Jewels (ALDI)	726	2.5 ●	311 ●	91	3.60
McCain Potato Nuggets	735	1.0 ●	450 ●	91	4.75
McCain Potato Smiles	740	1.0 ●	380 ●	87	4.75
Maggi Pommes	745	3.8 ●	360 ●	91	9.40
Seasons Pride Curly Fries (ALDI)	793	2.2 ●	500 ●	81	6.15
HASH BROWNS					
McCain Hash Browns Shredded	732	1.0 ●	450 ●	91	4.75
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Hash Browns	733	1.0 ●	156 ●	90	4.25
Birds Eye Crispy & Golden Hash Browns	733	1.0 ●	156 ●	90	3.95
Seasons Pride Hash Browns (ALDI)	733	2.6 ●	227 ●	91	3.60
You'll Love Coles Hash Browns	733	1.0 ●	160 ●	90	3.80
MASH					
You'll Love Coles Mashed Potato Original	427	3.1 ●	257 ●	76	4.20
Woolworths Select Mashed Potato with Cracked Pepper	450	2.9 ●	210 ●	76	4.50
Woolworths Select Mashed Potato	470	3.2 ●	210 ●	76	4.50
ROAST					
Birds Eye Oven Roast Roast Onion & Herb Seasoned Potatoes	484	0.3 ●	182 ●	91	4.35
Birds Eye Oven Roast Country Style Potatoes	565	0.3 ●	165 ●	93	5.10
McCain Mini Roasts Italian Herbs	592	0.4 ●	320 ●	85	4.55
McCain Mini Roasts Sea Salt & Garlic	592	0.7 ●	320 ●	85	4.55
McCain Mini Roasts Sour Cream & Chives	592	0.4 ●	320 ●	85	4.55
Birds Eye Oven Roast Rosemary & Garlic Potatoes	597	1.9 ●	165 ●	91	5.10
Birds Eye Oven Roast Traditional Style Potatoes	599	1.9 ●	165 ●	91	5.10
WEDGES					
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Wedges in Beer Batter	474	0.6 ●	57 ●	88	4.65
Woolworths Select Potato Wedges (A)	500	0.3 ●	40 ●	97	4.35
Seasons Pride Rustic Wedges (ALDI)	508	1.2 ●	40 ●	98	3.60
WeightWatchers Crunch Oven Wedges	535	0.3 ●	200 ●	96	4.00
McCain Healthy Choice Country Style Wedges	546	0.6 ●	50 ●	97	4.10
Birds Eye Golden Crunch Wedges	564	0.5 ●	254 ●	88	4.30
McCain Original Crunchy Potato Wedges	631	0.8 ●	300 ●	87	4.75
McCain Hot Banditos Crunchy Potato Wedges	651	0.8 ●	415 ●	87	4.75
Seasons Pride Potato Wedges (ALDI)	673	0.5 ●	348 ●	88	3.60
McCain Beer Batter Crunchy Potato Wedges	679	0.6 ●	308 ●	85	4.75
You'll Love Coles Chunky Potato Wedges	730	0.6 ●	370 ●	83	4.00
Birds Eye Oven Bake Wedges Lightly Seasoned	744	0.6 ●	365 ●	83	4.20

USING THE TABLE

Nutrient information From information provided on the product packaging.

- Saturated fat: ● Green ≤1.5g/100g, ● Amber 1.6g-4.9g/100g
- Sodium: ● Green ≤120mg/100g, ● Amber 121mg-599mg/100g

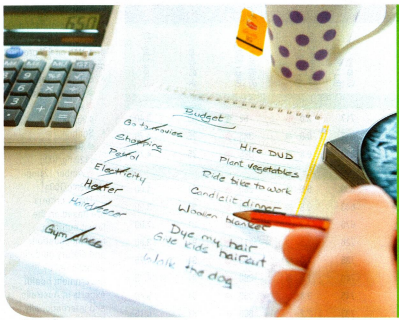
These criteria are based on the latest nutrition recommendations and dietary guidelines established by government health experts in Australia and internationally.

Potato % From each product's ingredients list on packaging.

Price Based on prices we paid in Sydney in March 2009. Sizes vary, so for ease of comparison we have calculated the price per kilogram and rounded to the nearest five cents.

TABLE NOTES

ns Not specified.
(A) Cooking instructions recommend deep-frying, which is why this product did not make it into our What to Buy list.



Tough times

How has the global financial crisis affected CHOICE members? We find out how you're coping with the downturn.

nutshell

- Many CHOICE members are fearful about the quality of life they'll be able to afford in retirement. Some are staying in the workforce longer than anticipated and revising their retirement plans.
- Saving more, spending less and getting value from every purchase are high on the agenda.

It's been a traumatic time for financial markets and the wider economy, with the world experiencing its deepest and most synchronised recession in 70 years. And while Australia has so far been spared the very worst effects of the global financial crisis, consumers have seen the value of their retirement savings plummet, share portfolios smashed, property prices stagnate and unemployment rise. Confidence has been shaken, which is having a discernible effect on our everyday lives, with fears about meeting the cost of living in retirement, maintaining employment and keeping up with mortgage repayments front of mind for many people.

In March, CHOICE surveyed more than 2000 magazine and online members to find out how they're managing the downturn.

Saving more, spending less

CHOICE members are curtailing unnecessary spending and trying hard to reduce their household expenses. Of our respondents, 68% have a household budget and the majority are sticking to it mostly, while 54% have actively found ways to reduce their household bills. One big area being targeted is in the weekly shop, with more than half trying harder to reduce their grocery bill compared with the same time last year, and 22% switching to a cheaper supermarket.

There's been a shift to generic brands since the downturn started: 85% of respondents buy generic products and 25% reported increasing their spend on those items. This is consistent with trends across the economy, as the media reports shoppers are ditching expensive brands, seeking "more for less" and expecting value for money on all purchases.

Members are also looking for ways to cut the cost of non-essentials. International travel, clothes and entertainment top the list of discretionary items being targeted, with more than 40% of respondents cutting expenditure in those areas.

A return to lost values

A common theme throughout responses was the need to return to old-fashioned values of saving and thrift, and a rejection of what some see as a wasteful, throwaway society that relies too much on credit. However, for many members this isn't really a change at all, as they were already careful and considered with their money.

"I can't fathom the 'spend, spend, spend' ethos," said one member. "My natural instinct is to save for what is becoming a stormy rather than a rainy day." Another commented: "I grew up in an era when apart from borrowing to buy a house, one had to save to buy other big-ticket items and was ultimately rewarded with a sense of achievement. This seems to be entirely lacking in today's culture of instant gratification and consequential debt."

There's plenty of confusion and anger over the federal government's cash handouts too, which many members see as perpetuating the problems of over-consumption and consumerism. "Encouragement to spend is stupid when you have less to spend," said a member. "We should be teaching people to be frugal again and to seriously revalue their lifestyle." Another was "concerned by all these stimulus packages. I don't recall this sort of thing during the last recession; people just worked through the tough times and eventually things got better."

Retirement fears

Most households have experienced a large reduction in wealth over the past year. The stock market crash is largely to blame, with individual investors' share portfolios, managed funds and superannuation accounts plummeting as a result. That other great avenue for our capital, residential property, has also reduced in value in some areas since the economic downturn hit.

Sixty-four percent of respondents reported a decline in the value of their overall assets since the same time last year, while 18% reported their overall wealth has stayed about the same. In 15% of cases, the value of household assets actually increased.

Not surprisingly, superannuation losses are leaving many members fearful about their future. While 57% of respondents believe they're on track for a comfortable retirement, almost a third do not, and 12% don't know or haven't thought about it – including four out of 10 respondents under 35 years of age. As you'd expect, confidence about the future was related to the level of household income; 50% of respondents with an annual income under $35,000 don't believe they're on track for a comfortable retirement, but the figure drops to just 19% for respondents with more than $150,000. Age was also a factor, with the general trend being that confidence about a comfortable retirement increases as respondents got older. Nearly three-quarters of those aged 66 and older – many of whom may already have finished working – believe they're on track for a comfortable retirement.

Personal finances

As a result of changes to the economic climate, a large number of respondents are saving more, directing money into deposit accounts, investments, super contributions and so on, as well as paying down more debt. And when it comes to credit cards, CHOICE members are savvy, with 80% paying off their card in full every month to avoid interest and late payment fees and 27% of cardholders reducing their debt compared with this time last year.

Almost all respondents drive and more than a third shopped around for cheaper car insurance in the past year. More than a quarter (28%) of all respondents also shopped around for home insurance and 18% for health cover.

Despite the downturn, 54% of respondents said they're in a financial position to invest money. Their preferred destinations for excess funds were fairly evenly divided between bank deposits, shares and property.

Managing the mortgage

When we reported on strategies to combat mortgage stress (*CHOICE*, July 2008), the standard variable interest rate was 9.4%, following 12 successive rate rises since 2002. How times have changed! While mortgage stress remains a major concern, it's for different reasons: central bank interest rates have come down 4.25% in the past year, with most of that being passed on to mortgage holders, but unemployment is rising, heightening the financial pressure on those affected. >

A common theme among the responses from CHOICE members was the need to return to old-fashioned values of saving and thrift.

WHAT MEMBERS SAY ABOUT THE FUTURE

Thirty-one percent of survey respondents believe they're not on track for a comfortable retirement, with many blaming sharemarket declines.

"Our self-managed superannuation fund – all in blue-chip stuff – has decreased in value by so much I can probably never retire in comfort and maintain an ordinary lifestyle. My wife and I earn slightly more than the sum that would enable me to get a part pension, and I can't get a pension until she is 65 anyway. So much for being a taxpayer for over 50 years!"

"As a retired couple, we will need to devise ways to overcome lost super. However, we expect financial recovery will [take a long time], as the unemployment problem is yet to impact fully."

"My self-funded pension is losing value and living costs are rising. The combined effect does not augur well for my financial future. I would have to liquidate assets or apply for a government part-pension to maintain my present lifestyle."

"If the stock market recovers within two years our retirement position will be reasonable. Any longer is of considerable concern."

"I retired last year and put my money into term deposits in a pension account, which I feel is keeping my money secure until the economy picks up. I was fortunate that my superannuation had not lost any money in the 12 months before I retired. I was adamant I could not afford to lose any after I retired; hence the term deposits."

"I have had a steady career for the last 30 years and am due to retire next year. With a considerable mortgage debt and son in high school I do worry about my financial future and how I will manage during my retirement. I also have concern for the next generation and how they will cope in the current and future economic climate."

"I am on a superannuation pension from a fund that is less than half the value it was a year ago. This means it will run out much earlier than it was designed to do two years ago, and I will then have to exist on a full Centrelink age pension."

Many CHOICE members have already lived through recessions and retain a general sense of optimism about the future.

Nearly half of all respondents have a mortgage, and 12% of mortgage holders consider themselves to be in mortgage stress, with a small number (2%) having been forced to sell their property due to the downturn.

Although the term "mortgage stress" is subjective, a traditional and still widely used way to gauge stress levels is to look at whether a household is paying more than 30% of its income on housing costs (the established benchmark). And undoubtedly, if you're on a low income and paying one-third of it on home loan repayments, there won't be much left over for your cost of living. However, if you have a moderate or high income, paying a third towards your mortgage may still leave you with plenty to live on (provided your source of income continues). That's why the 30/40 rule is now the preferred measure of stress – restricting the 30% stress test to the 40% of lowest income households. Of the respondents who have a mortgage, 39% pay more than one-third of their household income on mortgage repayments, and 57% of those with a mortgage (or 27% of all respondents) are taking advantage of the drop in interest rates to pay off their loan sooner.

For some people, the recession has actually made mortgage management a little easier. "The current economic climate has not had any real impact on me except it has allowed me to pay a substantial extra sum off my mortgage," said one respondent. Another commented: "It sounds awful but the current economic conditions are helping us; we have good job security and as home prices and interest rates are down we have purchased an investment property. The combined repayments on our two mortgages now are not much higher than the single one was a few years ago with the higher rates."

How safe is your job?

The prospect of losing a job is most people's biggest fear in a recession and unemployment is on the rise, hitting 5.7% nationally in May – the highest rate since February 2004 and an increase of 1.8 percentage points in 15 months. There's widespread belief among economists and forecasters that job losses will significantly increase in the next two years. A March 2009 report by Sensis found that unemployment was the single biggest concern for worried consumers.

So how are CHOICE members faring? One of the most interesting findings of our survey is the relatively strong feeling of job security among the majority of CHOICE members – 41% of respondents are "very confident" about their job security, while 45% are "quite confident". Job confidence has been increasing in the general population too, after hitting historic lows. The February 2009 Westpac/Melbourne Institute Consumer Sentiment Survey, which measures consumers' feelings of job security, showed a deterioration of 59% over the previous year and the highest level of job insecurity since the survey began in 1974. However, the general confidence level dramatically increased in March and April.

Four percent of our respondents report having lost their job within the past year, while 7% said that fate had been suffered by someone in their household. Of those in paid employment, 14% report being "not very" or "not at all confident" in the security of their job.

Many people are putting in more time and effort at the workplace, with 25% of respondents working longer hours than before for the same amount of pay. One member believes "we should all work harder and be more conscious about the value of honesty, even towards our employer – so no sick leave for [our] own purposes or taking things home that we shouldn't!"

Five percent of respondents have been forced to manage with lower earnings, as their employer has reduced their working hours through measures such as a four-day working week. Again, some people support such moves. "I would like everybody to take a reduction in work hours to keep other people employed if needed," said one member.

She'll be right ...

Most of CHOICE's members have lived through recessions in the past. While there's a lot of concern and uncertainty, many retain a general sense of optimism about the future, believing they'll weather the global financial storm. "My father taught me that decent shares will recover, which I put a lot of faith in as he survived the 1930s depression," said one member. Others believe "in the resilience of the Australian economy" and that "people who survive the next two or three years will be fine in the longer term".

In the coming months we will be addressing some of the issues raised through your comments and feedback. ■

Did you know ?

Where you won't compromise Thirty-four percent of survey respondents have postponed the purchase of a big-ticket item, such as a TV or fridge, for economic reasons. But 92% will not compromise on the quality of household appliances to save money. Even in a recession, CHOICE members place very high importance on quality as well as price.

Another area where people are reluctant to make changes to save money is on their children's education – 26% of respondents have children in school, and while we don't know the ratio of public to private schools, the vast majority have not changed schools to reduce fees, nor do they intend to.

Interestingly, the attitude to childcare is very different. Of the fairly small number of respondents who use childcare, 28% have made a conscious effort to reduce their childcare fees (that's 4% of all survey respondents). We can only speculate on how they're making these savings; changing to a cheaper centre or reducing the number of days (whether by choice or having no other option) are likely to be the most common ways to reduce such costs.

Many happy tax returns

CHOICE reveals items you may not realise you can claim on your tax return.

nutshell

- Clue up on the items you may be able to deduct – as a rough guide, ask yourself if they impact on your ability to earn your income.
- Make sure you keep receipts where possible.

Budgets are stretched and times are tough for many people. But there are simple ways you can reduce your taxable income to save money. The most important thing to remember, though, is to keep the receipts for all the expenses you claim.

Work-related expenses

You can claim some deductions for expenses incurred while performing your job. You need receipts if the total of your work-related claims exceeds $300. That limit does not apply to claims for car, meal allowance, award transport payments allowance and travel allowance expenses.

Some work-related expenses that you may be able to claim, depending on your circumstances, include union fees, overtime meals, formal education courses provided by professional associations, seminars, conferences or education workshops, books, journals and trade magazines, tools and equipment, protective items such as sunscreen and sunglasses, computers and software, and telephone and home office expenses. If you buy income protection insurance, the premiums can also be claimed as a deduction. Life, trauma and critical illness insurance, however, are not tax deductible.

While things such as magazines and CDs may be deductible, it's important to note you can only claim for what's directly relevant to your job or income. According to the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) website, "a truck driver can claim a deduction for a subscription to *Australian Truckie* magazine but cannot claim a deduction for subscribing to magazines with no specific occupational focus – for example, *Wheels* magazine."

Bank fees

Some bank fees are deductible; the key is whether the fees are connected to your ability to earn income or access your income. If you pay ATM or over-the-counter fees to withdraw your income from your account, they're deductible, as are any monthly fees for a savings account that generates income for you. On the other hand, according to Michael Dirkis of the Taxation Institute of Australia, if the account is simply a way for you to pay your bills and other expenses and it doesn't earn interest, the fees involved can't be claimed. Similarly, if you pay a single annual fee for a banking package (home loan, credit card, transaction account) it's unlikely that fee is deductible.

Donations to charity

Monetary donations of $2 or more to charity may be claimed as a tax deduction, provided the organisation has deductible gift recipient (DGR) status, which you can check at the ABN Lookup website at www.abr.business.gov.au. However, not all payments to charities can be claimed. For instance, you can't claim charity raffle tickets, the purchase of items such as pens and chocolates, or the cost of attending a fundraising ball.

Clothing expenses

You can claim the cost of buying, washing, drying and ironing eligible work clothes, including laundromat expenses and dry cleaning. Examples of eligible clothes are work uniforms, protective clothing required for your job and occupation-specific clothes such as the checked trousers chefs wear. See "Claiming a deduction for work clothing" at www.ato.gov.au for details.

If the clothes are eligible, you can even claim for the cost of the washing, drying and ironing you do yourself; the ATO considers $1 for a full load of work clothes to be a reasonable basis for working out your laundry claim. If you choose a different basis to work out your claim, you may be asked to explain that basis. When the amount of your clothing expenses claim exceeds $150, the ATO requires written evidence such as diary entries and receipts.

Useful contacts

Go to www.ato.gov.au/individuals to find further expenses you can claim to reduce your taxable income. You can do your own tax return for free, and the ATO says refunds are usually paid out within 14 days. Otherwise, see a registered tax agent, who typically charges about $100 for an individual's simple tax lodgement – and that fee is tax-deductible in next year's return. ■

Trans Australia

CHOICE finds some manufacturers still sneak unhealthy trans fats into our foods.

nutshell

- Many of the foods CHOICE tested in 2005 still contain unacceptably high levels of trans fats.
- There's no real need for food manufacturers to use these heart-stopping fats. Some manufacturers have cut back, while others have stopped using trans fats altogether.

They rarely rate a mention on the label, but the trans fats hidden in many processed foods are worse for your health than the saturated fats we all know about. In 2005, CHOICE tested more than 50 processed foods and found many contained trans fats at unacceptably high levels. We've since retested and the results are disturbing: while the fast-food chains have reduced their levels of trans fats, and some of the foods we tested in 2005 have eliminated trans fats altogether, others now contain even more than before. Foods such as pies, cakes and doughnuts may contain heart-stopping trans fats without you even knowing about it.

Back in 2005, CHOICE called for Australian regulations to require manufacturers to include the amount of trans fat as well as saturated fat on the label, as happens now in the US and Canada, and we are still waiting. The previous federal government set up the National Collaboration on Trans Fats with the aim of reducing the amount of trans fats in the Australian food supply, but manufacturers are still not required to identify the amount of trans fats in their products.

In the US, the use of trans fats in foods has decreased 50% since labelling was introduced. However, in Australia some food manufacturers are exploiting the lack of transparency to avoid reformulating their products to make them healthier (see Trans Exposure, opposite).

What are trans fats?

Trans fats are found mainly in deep-fried fast foods and processed foods made with margarine or shortening. They're created by hydrogenation, a process that's been used by the food industry for about 100 years, in which liquid oils rich in polyunsaturated fats are converted into more solid (and more saturated) fats suitable for making cakes and pastries. Trans fats are also formed in the process of refining polyunsaturated oils, and some cooking oils used by fast-food outlets and bakeries for deep frying are also partially hydrogenated to slow the process of oxidation that can turn the oil rancid.

Advances in food technology, however, have made it possible for manufacturers to produce cooking oils, margarines and shortenings without depending so much on hydrogenation. There are now no valid technical reasons for manufacturers to continue using hydrogenated fats and oils.

Some foods, mainly beef, lamb and dairy products, contain naturally occurring trans fats. These fats are produced by micro-organisms in the rumen (or fore-stomach) of cattle and sheep, which partially hydrogenate the fats and oils from the animals' feed. A recent survey found that on average about 60% of trans fats in the Australian diet come from these natural sources.

Did you know

Global restrictions While trans fats are not completely banned anywhere, some jurisdictions have imposed tighter restrictions on their use than in Australia.

Denmark (in 2003) and Switzerland (in 2008) have banned the sale of food products in which trans fats are more than 2% of the total fat.

UK regulations require hydrogenated fats to be identified in the ingredients list on the label. But in the European Union (which includes Denmark and the UK), labels don't have to disclose the level of trans fats unless the manufacturer is making a nutrition claim.

Since 1 January 2006 food manufacturers in the US have been required to list trans fats on the nutrition label immediately under saturated fat. New York and Philadelphia have banned restaurants and fast-food outlets from serving foods containing more than 0.5g of trans fats per serving; California has legislation in place that bans the use of industrial trans fats in restaurants and fast-food outlets from 1 January 2010, and bakers who make doughnuts will have until 2011 to comply. These actions have had a substantial impact on the use of trans fats in the US. (The food giant Kraft, for example, reduced the trans fat content in about 650 of its products to meet the labelling deadline.)

Canada also requires food labels to show the level of trans fats. In June 2007, Health Canada put the Canadian food industry on notice to limit the trans fat content of its products within two years. It set the limits at 2% of total fat for margarine and cooking oils and 5% of total fat for all other foods, including ingredients sold to restaurants. To ensure progress, Health Canada has been analysing a wide variety of foods and publishing the results.

Trans fats are worse than saturated fats because they can also lower the 'good' component of blood cholesterol.

What are the risks?

Trans fats increase your risk of heart disease and sudden death from heart-related causes. Like saturated fats, trans fats can raise total blood cholesterol levels, as well as the LDL, or "bad" component, of blood cholesterol. But they're worse than saturated fats in that they can also lower the "good" HDL component. There's also some evidence that these fats may increase your risk of developing diabetes.

Experts agree that, gram for gram, the risks from trans fats are greater than from saturated. In fact, the evidence against trans fats is so strong that Denmark and Switzerland have banned the sale of foods in which trans fat is more than 2% of the total fat content. In Australia, the National Heart Foundation Tick program limits trans fats to less than 1% of fat.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends trans fats contribute less than 1% of our daily energy intake – less than 2.3g of fat for someone with an average daily energy intake of 8700kJ – and some experts now recommend complete or near-complete avoidance of industrially produced trans fats to avoid adverse heath effects.

The risk from naturally produced trans fats compared with industrially produced ones is less clear. There are chemical differences between the two, and some recent research seems to suggest naturally occurring trans fats are not as harmful – but experts still disagree on the issue.

What's the regulator doing?

Although Australia's regulator, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) wants to see industrially produced trans fats removed from the food supply, it's not in favour of requiring trans fats to be labelled. FSANZ argues, based on a survey of consumer responses in the US (carried out in 2003, before labelling was introduced), that introducing trans fat labelling in Australia would have only a very small effect on consumption of trans fats. It further argues we shouldn't rely on the approach taken in other countries, but take into account the fact that dietary intakes here are already low by international standards. However, CHOICE isn't convinced.

FSANZ estimates that on average Australians eat 1.4g of trans fats per day, which is well below both WHO's recommended maximum daily intake and below

TRANS EXPOSURE

CHOICE retested those foods still available that we found to be high in trans fat back in 2005. This time we also included a selection of doughnuts and foods from some other fast-food chains. Of the 32 foods we analysed, these 13 contained more than 4% trans fats (as a percentage of total fat). They're listed from highest to lowest in trans fat.

- **Coles** Bakery Fresh Donut
- **Burns & Ricker** Bagel Crisps Plain
- **Herbert Adams** Mixed Vegetable Pasty
- **Pampas** Short Crust Pastry
- **Four'N Twenty** Traditional Meat Pie
- **McDonald's** McCafé Iced Donut
- **Independent bakery** Doughnut
- **Donut King** Glazed
- **Donut King** Iced Classic
- **Sara Lee** Snack Quiche Lorraine
- **Sargents** Party Pack Sausage Rolls
- **Mr Donut** Choc Ring Doughnut
- **Woolworths** Caramel Slice (According to the nutrition information panel, this contains less than 0.1% trans fats, but our testing found 0.7%, 4% of total fat content. A second retested sample showed the same result. Woolworths told us the manufacturer hadn't changed the process or ingredients but they were considering changing the label to <1% trans fats.)

While some food producers have decreased trans fats, they have increased saturated fats in their foods.

► Products that have significantly less trans fat than in 2005 are Nutella, McDonald's McNuggets and medium fries, Erica's Kitchen Vol au Vents, Ritz Cheese Crackers and McDonald's Big Mac and medium fries. Unfortunately, Burns & Ricker Bagel Crisps now contain more trans fat than when we tested in 2005.

the average daily intake of trans fats in the US, Canada and Europe. However, averages can be deceptive. FSANZ's statistics also reveal that more than a million Australians are currently putting their health at risk by eating more than the WHO's recommended maximum.

Processed foods that make claims such as "low cholesterol" or "high in polyunsaturates" are already required to state the level of trans fats on the label. Most cooking oils and margarine-type spreads fall into this category and give a breakdown of their fat composition. It's an indication of how effective labelling can be that of the dozens of such products on supermarket shelves we found only two containing more than about 1% of the total fat as trans – You'll Love Coles Vegetable Oil with 4.6% and You'll Love Coles Sunflower Oil with 1.8%.

Have things improved?

CHOICE retested most of the 17 food products that when tested in 2005 wouldn't have been permitted in Denmark or Switzerland because of their trans fat content (see Did You Know?, page 29). We also tested some new foods, namely deep-fried fast foods and doughnuts from chains as well as independent cake shops. Overall, we tested 32 foods and found half of the original 17 still contain trans fats at more than 2% of their total fat. Worse, Burns & Ricker Bagel Crisps now contain a greater percentage of trans fats than in 2005 (see Trans Exposure, page 29).

However, there have been some improvements. Two of the original 17 products, both of them fast foods, have made significant reductions, and four have almost eliminated trans fats altogether. They're listed below with their current percentages of trans fats as a percentage of total fat.

- ✓ Nutella Hazelnut Spread (<0.4%)
- ✓ McDonald's McNuggets and medium fries (<0.7%)
- ✓ Erica's Kitchen Vol au Vents (0.5%)
- ✓ Ritz Cheese Crackers (0.9%)
- ✓ McDonald's Big Mac and medium fries (2% – just within the Danish/Swiss limit)
- ✗ Hungry Jack's Whopper and Medium Fries (2.4% – just over the limit but a big improvement on their 22.5% we found in 2005).

Unfortunately, however, according to their labels Hungry Jack's have at the same time increased their level of saturated fat in the same meal from 36% to 54%. Even though gram for gram, trans fats are worse for the heart, foods that contain a lot more saturated fats could negate any benefit from cutting back on trans fats.

What are manufacturers doing about trans fats?

According to FSANZ, the industry seems ready to and capable of responding to market demand for lower trans fats in foods, claiming all the manufacturers it contacted plan to reduce trans fats levels in their products. CHOICE had a more mixed response.

Patties Foods (Herbert Adams and Four'N Twenty) told us they don't normally test for trans fats, but do use low levels of trans fats in some of their products, and are working with the National Heart Foundation towards healthier products.

McDonald's introduced a vegetable oil blend in November 2006 that contains less than 1% trans fat. A spokesperson said they continue to look for opportunities to improve the nutrition profile of their menu.

Burns and Ricker Bagel Crisps' importer told us they are working with their US supplier to reduce the amount of trans fat to the previous low level.

Sara Lee said they are working with their suppliers to seek alternative fats low in trans but which don't compromise the quality of their products.

Krispy Kreme said they aim to introduce a low trans and low saturated fat product by the end of 2009.

Suitable margarines and cooking oils low in trans fats are now available, and there's no evidence that changing to these fats affects the quality, cost or availability of food. Food manufacturers and fast-food outlets could change their practices if there were more incentive for them to do so.

USING THE TABLE

Trans fats Our lab measured the amount of each individual fatty acid. This figure is all trans fats combined as a percentage of total fat.

Total fat The percentage found by our lab from one sample of each type of doughnut bought from supermarkets, doughnut chains and independent cake shops in Melbourne. The amount of fat absorbed would depend on cooking conditions so there is likely to be some batch-to-batch variation.

TABLE NOTES

(A) Mr Donut told us that, according to their own testing, their cooking oil contains no more than 0.4% trans fats.

What CHOICE wants

We want it made mandatory that the amount of trans fat and saturated fat be included on the label. We believe FSANZ is too complacent about the well-established risks to health from trans fats; our test results clearly show its kid glove approach isn't working. Labelling has had a substantial impact on the levels of trans fats in processed foods in the US and Canada; there's no reason to believe it wouldn't have a similar impact here. But it's also important we don't see trans fats reduced at the expense of increased levels of saturated fats in some foods.

FSANZ claims its ultimate goal is "a safe food supply and well-informed consumers". Trans fats offer no nutritional benefits and CHOICE believes consumers should be informed about how to avoid them. ■

We believe FSANZ is too complacent about the well-established risks to health from trans fats.

DOUGHNUTS

Doughnuts (ranked by % trans fat)	Trans fats (% of total fat)	Total fat (%)
Krispy Kreme Glazed Original (March 2009)	29.4	20.1
Coles Bakery Fresh Six Pack Iced Donuts	23.1	7.8
McDonalds McCafe Iced Donut	6.3	20.8
Donut King Glazed Donuts	4.9	20.3
Donut King Iced Classic	4.8	12.6
Independent A Iced doughnut	4.6	13.1
Mr Donut Two Pack (A)	4.4	13.5
Krispy Kreme Glazed Original (April 2009)	2.9	27.4
Dreamy Donuts Glazed	0.4	27.9
Woolworths Bakehouse Donut Iced Six Pack	<1.4	7.0
Independent D Iced doughnut	<0.9	11.2
Independent C Iced doughnut	<0.7	13.7
Independent B Iced doughnut	<0.6	17.3

DOUGHNUT DILEMMAS

Doughnuts are deep-fried, so most of their fat comes from the cooking oil. CHOICE tested doughnuts from 12 different outlets – seven of the doughnuts were obviously cooked in partially hydrogenated oils as they contained more than 4% trans as a percentage of total fats, but the other five were cooked in oils low in trans fats. Our findings (see table, above) show that food manufacturers can use low-trans cooking fats and oils if they really want.

The power of naming and shaming is also clear. In 2008, Krispy Kreme came under attack in the NSW state parliament and from the media for continuing to use trans fats in Australia while eliminating them from their US products. As a result, Krispy Kreme switched to a low-trans cooking oil from February this year. In the first sample of Krispy Kreme doughnuts we tested (bought in early March 2009) a massive 29% of the fats were trans fats, but a second sample, bought a month later, contained only a tenth as much trans fat. And we nearly had a heart attack on the spot when we saw how much fat overall some of these doughnuts contain. Dreamy Donuts Glazed and the second sample of Krispy Kreme doughnuts contained a massive 27%-28%, and three others were over 20%.

Tablet or powder?

Dishwasher tablets cost on average two-and-a-half times more per wash than powders. CHOICE Home Testers put them on trial.

nutshell

- Nineteen dishwasher detergents on trial, four of which claim to be eco-friendly.
- Only one of three dissolvable wrappers fully dissolved with every wash.

Since CHOICE's last dishwasher detergent report in Jan/Feb 2007, the number of packets of dishwasher detergents sold rose from 18.7 million to 19.8 million per year. That's an extra 38 million washes – a staggering amount of detergent. Sales trends indicate tablet sales are on the rise, currently holding 55% of market share, while powders hold 43% and liquids a mere 2%.

It's not surprising tablets are so popular as they're easy to use, particularly if they have dissolvable wrappers. But this convenience comes at a price as they can cost much more per wash than powders. Switching from a Finish Max-in-1 tablet to Coles Smart Buy powder, for example, could mean saving up to $186 per year for once a day dishwashing, while still getting good performance. Tablets also need a longer cycle time to allow the detergent to fully dissolve, so you can't use fast wash and delicate cycles to save time, energy or water.

On the other hand, powders are cheaper and further savings can be made if you dose according to how dirty your dishes are, or if your machine is half-full. For more energy and water saving tips with your dishwasher, see our dishwasher test report, Sleek and Slim, page 40.

Behind the hype

Marketing claims on the packaging fall just short of being able to unload your dishwasher for you. We came across claims such as Max-in-1 (with 11 actions), All-in-1 10 Power Actions, 8-in-1, 5-in-1, and 4-in-1. They refer to the number of performance actions or ingredients included in the product. But in most cases they're simply stating the inclusion of any or all typical dishwasher detergent ingredients (see page 34). It doesn't always mean you get anything extra compared with another detergent that isn't making any x-in-one claim. For example, almost all detergents on trial have enzymes, but not all list explicit claims.

Dissolvable wrappers

Three tablets come with dissolvable wrappers which are placed into the detergent dispenser. The wrappers are water-soluble and should quickly dissolve, releasing the detergent. They are Finish PowerBall Max-in-1, Morning Fresh Complete with Hydrofilm and Woolworths Select 8-in-1 with Action, but only the Finish dissolved all of the time.

The Morning Fresh and Woolworths Select wrappers dissolved most of the time but part of the detergent stayed intact for some washes, so this was likely to have lowered the average performance scores.

And the winners are ...

CHOICE's Home Testers rated the cleaning and streak-free ability of two Finish tablets, the PowerBall All-in-1 and Max-in-1, significantly better than the other detergents on test. Trialists' comments include: "Managed to clean a frying pan with burnt-on sauce spotlessly" and "I was very surprised at the results and will use this product in the future". However, these tablets are also the most expensive products on test, except for the "eco-friendly" Ecover tablets – see What to Buy, opposite, or the table on page 34 for prices.

What to buy

Tablets

	Cost per wash
Finish Powerball All-in-1 10 Power Actions Tablets	$0.53
Finish Powerball Max-in-1 Power Tabs	$0.58
Logix Automatic Dishwashing Tablets (ALDI)	$0.16

Powders

	Cost per wash
Morning Fresh Complete Dishwashing Powder Lemon Fresh	$0.18
Logix Automatic Dishwashing Powder (ALDI)	$0.15
Coles Smart Buy Automatic Dishwasher Powder	$0.07

Green options

	Cost per wash
Ecover Ecological Automatic Dishwasher Tablets	$0.72
Ecostore Auto Dishwash Powder Concentrate	$0.18
Squeek Phosphate-free Concentrate Auto Dishwash Sachets	$0.26
Seventh Generation Automatic Dishwashing Detergent	$0.19

▶ **Green options** are good performers that claim a low environment hazard, such as chlorine- and phosphate-free, totally biodegradable (not just the surfactant), 100% recyclable packaging, minimal petroleum-derived ingredients and no dyes or artificial fragrances. CHOICE's *Australian Green Consumer Guide* explains what to look for when buying green products: to purchase a copy, go to www.choice.com.au and click on Books.

In most cases, marketing claims are simply stating the inclusion of typical dishwasher detergent ingredients.

There is no statistical difference in performance among the remaining products (except one) and most performed reasonably well, with scores ranging from 76% to 83%. Tablets and powders, including those with eco-friendly claims, are scattered throughout this range, with no indication of tablets performing better than powders.

The lowest-rating Black & Gold powder detergent is the only other standout, rating significantly lower than all the others. Said one trialist: "Disappointed that it left plates dirty when they were put in fairly clean." >

HOW WE TRIAL

We survey the market and select the most popular products from each major brand that are widely available. Some brands have many more products on offer and hold greater market share, therefore more of these are included.

CHOICE Home Testers are each sent four detergents. They use each one three times in their dishwasher on a "normal" program and rate it for its cleaning performance and ability to leave dishes streak-free. The results are averaged and an overall score is calculated using the following weightings:

- Cleaning: 80%
- Streak-free: 20%

To check consistency among the trialists' ratings, one of the four products sent out is a control product – that is, the same as one of the other three. If the trialists' overall ratings of the control product are inconsistent, these results are excluded; this left 215 sets of results.

CHILD SAFETY

Dishwasher tablets can easily be mistaken for a yummy treat by inquisitive toddlers. The caustic nature of these detergents, if ingested, can seriously damage the lining of a child's throat. Always store dishwasher detergent in an overhead cupboard. Never leave detergent in the dishwasher – add it just before you switch it on and check after the wash that all of it was used.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE			SPECIFICATIONS						
Brand / product (in rank order; followed by number of trialists for each detergent in brackets)	Type	Overall score (%)	Cleaning score (%)	Streak-free score (%)	Dissolvable wrappers	Contains rinse aid	Active oxygen (no chlorine bleach)	No phosphates	Enzymes	Child safe cap	Cost per wash (cents)*
Finish PowerBall All-in-1 10 Power Actions Tablets (52)	Tablet	89	90	87		✓	✓		✓		53
Finish PowerBall Max-in-1 Power (42)	Tablet	85	85	85	✓	✓	✓		✓		58
Logix Automatic Dishwashing Powder (ALDI) (40)	Powder	83	83	81	na		✓		✓	✓	15
Morning Fresh Complete Dishwashing Powder Lemon Fresh (40)	Powder	83	83	82	na	✓	✓		✓	✓	18
Coles Smart Buy Automatic Dishwasher Powder (49)	Powder	81	82	79	na		✓		✓		7
Ecover Ecological Automatic Dishwasher Tablets (47) (A)	Tablet	81	81	80			✓	✓	✓		72
Ecostore Auto Dishwash Powder Concentrate (38) (A)	Powder	80	80	79	na	ns	✓	✓	✓	✓	18
Home Brand 3 in 1 Dishwasher Tablets (Woolworths) (37)	Tablet	80	80	81		✓	✓		✓		19
Logix Automatic Dishwashing Tablets (ALDI) (43)	Tablet	80	80	80			✓		✓		16
Morning Fresh Complete with Hydrofilm Wrapper (47)	Tablet	80	80	79	✓	✓	✓		✓		37
Squeek Phosphate Free Concentrate Auto Dishwash Sachets (41) (A)	Powder	79	79	80	na	✓	✓	✓	✓		26
Swift Boosted 4 in 1 Action Auto Dishwash Tablets (IGA) (52)	Tablet	79	79	79		✓			✓		28
Woolworths Select Dishwasher Tablets 8 in 1 Action (45)	Tablet	79	80	76	✓	✓	✓		✓		50
You'll Love Coles Ultra Action Dishwasher Tablets 5 in 1 (49)	Tablet	79	79	79		✓	✓		✓		36
Seventh Generation Automatic Dishwashing Detergent (37) (A)	Powder	78	79	74	na		✓	✓	✓		19
Kwit Double Action Lemon Dishwasher Powder (42)	Powder	77	77	75	na		✓			✓	18
Tundra Automatic Dishwashing Powder (ALDI) (36)	Powder	77	77	75	na			✓	✓		7
Finish Power Powder (49)	Powder	76	76	74	na		✓	ns	✓		19
Black & Gold Automatic Dishwashing Detergent Powder Lemon (IGA) (42)	Powder	68	68	68	na						8

TABLE NOTES

** Cost per wash is per tablet or per 30g of powder based on what we paid in February 2009.*

(A) Products that claim to be "eco-friendly".

na Not applicable.

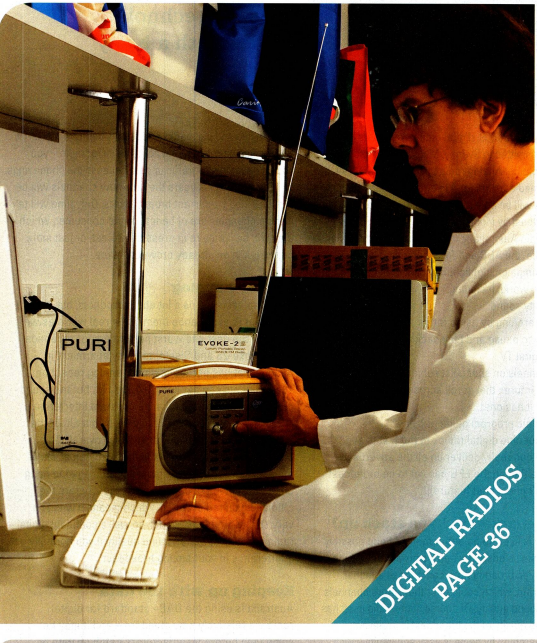
ns Not stated.

WHAT'S IN A DISHWASHER DETERGENT?

Alkaline salts are the main component. They react with fats on the dishes, but are also dangerous if swallowed, as they have a corrosive reaction in your mouth and throat. They're water softeners, which help the detergent work better by binding minerals in hard water. Their very high pH level dissolves dirt, but also strips glazes on crockery and wears away glassware over time . Some alkalis include sodium carbonate and sodium meta-silicate, which is particularly caustic and dangerous if swallowed – some detergents include up to 65%.
Surfactants lower the surface tension of the water so it better wets the dishes to loosen dirt.
Chlorine or oxygen bleaches help break down protein soils and tea and coffee stains, but powders containing chlorine can make your plastic kitchenware deteriorate.
Corrosion inhibitors These minimise corrosion of metal cutlery and the dishwasher. They're usually aluminium salts.
Enzymes help you get good wash results at lower temperatures (about 40°C–55°C), which is better for your crockery. Enzymes break down protein and starch-based stains such as egg, pasta and cereal. You may see them listed as amylase or protease.
Rinse aid lowers the surface tension of the rinse water so it easily runs off the dishes, taking dirt with it. For rinse aid to work well it should be the last part of the detergent to dissolve.
Others Colorants and fragrances improve the look and smell, thickening agents stop liquid detergents seeping through the dispenser and fillers help smooth the flow of powder detergents.

On test

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances – they're all tested here.



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For more product tests go to www.choice.com.au

CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, as well as developing our own in order to match the way consumers use a product in reality. We buy the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and so that we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

BEST BUY

CHOICE Best Buy CHOICE calls a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Best Buys.

GREEN BUY

CHOICE Green Buy CHOICE calls a product a Green Buy if it delivers both good quality and environmental performance at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Green Buys.

CHOICE Video When you see the CHOICE Video icon, you can find more information about that story at choice.com.au.

Radio plus?

Digital radio is off to a sound start, but the new technology comes with a hefty price tag.

nutshell

- Digital radio has some positives, but for now it's expensive.
- Quality of the broadcast sound is irrelevant if the radio itself can't effectively reproduce it.

Since May/June 2009, digital radio broadcasts have been transmitted in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide. Analog radio hasn't been affected and there's no immediate plan for it to end, but soon residents in these cities will be able to receive a digital equivalent of content broadcast by most major radio stations.

Digital Radio Australia, a consortium of Commercial Radio Australia, the ABC and SBS, has released an advertising campaign highlighting some of the advantages of digital radio world, including:

- high-quality sound
- station searching by name rather than frequency
- the ability to pause and play back radio in a similar way to digital TV
- extra channels on specialist subjects
- text and pictures that scroll across your radio screen (if it has one)
- an electronic program guide (EPG).

CHOICE put nine digital radios to the test to see whether they can really deliver on all the advertised advantages (although the EPG has yet to be broadcast so we couldn't check that feature).

Does the marketing hype stack up?

Sound quality is likely to be better than AM and possibly even FM transmissions, provided it's broadcast in high quality. However, broadcasters can choose a higher compression rate, which could offer them more channels but reduces sound quality. Of course, if the radio itself has poor sound the quality of the broadcast is irrelevant.

Station searching by name is easy and intuitive with most models on test, but a good display arrangement is essential. As a general rule, screens big enough to allow scrolling down are a little easier to use than those that scroll across. Scrolling text with the current playlist or other information may be of benefit, although some of this space will be taken up by advertising which some may find distracting. Fortunately, all but one of the radios on test (the Pure One Elite) allow you to dim the screen when not in use.

Pausing and playback have been a boon for digital TV, and we see no reason for it not to be so for radio – you should never miss a traffic update because the phone rings.

For the next six years the only new channels will be those owned by current broadcasters. Only time will tell if extra channels are of benefit to the consumer, which they will be if they're in areas of interest, or just more confusion in an already crowded space.

Digital v analog

Technical tests tell us a lot about products, but it's important to experience them in the real world as well. We took the best and worst performers for reception (Pure Evoke-2S and Siesta) to a city apartment in Sydney that has particularly poor analog reception. The residents can get both AM and FM, but the sound quality is poor because there's constant interference in the signal and it occasionally drops out altogether.

Both digital radios performed well overall. The Siesta had some trouble in the most difficult areas of the apartment, but for the most part managed to hang on to the signal. We conducted this test before the official digital radio launch, which means it wasn't a very strong broadcast signal, so we're confident digital radio can deliver better sound quality if you normally get interference in your analog broadcast.

Keeping up with the data

Australia is using the DAB+ standard for digital radio – a relatively new standard – and it may be some time before manufacturers catch up with its potential. This means you may need to upgrade your radio's operating system to provide better performance or fix problems. This is usually done by downloading a file from the internet and loading it into the radio via its USB connection. All radios in this test, except the OXX and Revo, have a USB port. Alternatively, check with the manufacturer before you buy to see if they can do it for you. >

What to buy

For sound

72% Pure Evoke-2S

PRICE $699

GOOD POINTS

- Produces a natural sound with very good vocals and clean bass, mid-range and high frequencies. Can produce a good volume level without noticeable distortion. Provides a good sense of stereo imaging.
- Two-year warranty.
- Live radio pause/rewind.
- Can run on batteries (but only a proprietary battery).
- Carry handle.
- Equal-best standby energy score.

BAD POINTS

- Expensive.
- Lacks internet radio and streaming features.
- No separate power indicator – if the display is dimmed, it may not be obvious whether the radio is on or off.

For portability

58% Pure One Elite

PRICE $299

GOOD POINTS

- Has an easy-to-grip, non-slip covering.
- Two-year warranty.
- Equal-best standby energy score.
- Live radio pause/rewind.
- Can run on normal batteries as well as a proprietary battery.
- OK vocals, mid-range and high frequencies, if a little muddy or tinny at times. Produces an OK level of volume without noticeable distortion. OK sense of stereo imaging.

BAD POINTS

- No separate power indicator – if the display is dimmed, it may not be obvious whether the radio is on or off.
- No carry handle.

For a clock radio

At these prices, none of the radios on test really fit this category. However, all have a clock and alarm function. The Pure Chronos II and Siesta, below, are relatively inexpensive, small and look like clock radios. The Chronos II has a slightly better reception score than the Siesta, but neither has good sound when turned up.

51% Pure Chronos II

PRICE $249

51% Pure Siesta

PRICE $199

About the rest

- The Pure Avanti Flow has good stereo sound, an iPod dock, remote control and the ability to stream music via wireless networking, as well as internet radio connectivity. However, its on-board controls are poorly labelled, it doesn't work with batteries, has comparatively high standby power consumption and can't pause/rewind live radio. It's also the most expensive, largest and heaviest radio in the test.
- The Pure Evoke Flow has good sound and the ability to stream music via wireless networking as well as internet radio connectivity, but is a mono radio with no pause/rewind function and has comparatively high standby power consumption. It can work with a proprietary battery pack and has a carry handle for added portability.
- The Roberts has OK stereo sound and the ability to stream music via wireless networking, as well as internet radio connectivity. It's limited to five channel presets (the least of all on test), but can work with normal batteries and managed less than one watt when in standby mode. It has a carry handle and can pause/rewind live radio.
- The Revo has a remote control, the ability to stream music via wireless networking as well as internet radio connectivity, and can pause/rewind live radio. It's a mono radio and our tester noticed some buzzing in the cabinet at low frequencies, but otherwise has OK sound. It doesn't work with batteries and has comparatively high standby power consumption.
- The OXX is a mono radio that can produce good volume, but its sound can be harsh and the bass is lacking. Its on-board controls are poorly labelled and difficult to read and it has comparatively high standby power consumption. However, it has the ability to stream music via wireless networking as well as internet radio connectivity and can pause/rewind live radio.
- The Pure Chronos II and Siesta each have a wire hanging from the rear for an aerial. The Chronos II has more controls and a slightly bigger display.

A digital radio's screen size and shape are important so you can easily see any scrolling text.

< DAB has been in use in the UK for some time and is reasonably well established there. Radios designed for DAB+ should work with DAB, but DAB-only radios won't work here.

If you're overseas and thinking of buying a digital radio, make sure it is designed to handle DAB+.

It's estimated there could be as many as 80 digital stations broadcasting by August 2009, however there were only 32 possible at the time of our testing. All except the OXX and Revo can handle the 32 stations; the OXX and Revo could only find 22, which, depending on what's being broadcast in your area, may limit the number of digital channels you can potentially tune into. ■

HOW WE TEST

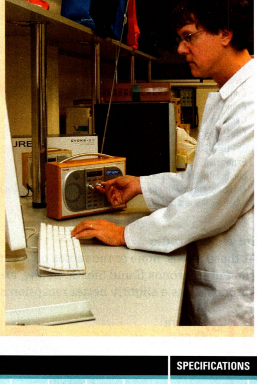
Two radios failed during testing (Pure Evoke Flow and One Elite); the results are based on their replacements.

Sound quality Our tester listens to the same six stereo music tracks at the same volume on each radio via a digital broadcast. In particular, he listens for distortion, rattles or other odd noises, stereo separation where appropriate and a natural sound across all frequencies.

Ease of use Our tester uses all the main functions of the radios to assess their ease of use. In particular, he looks for ease of the initial setup, clarity of labelling, placement and functionality of the buttons and knobs, size and clarity of the display, whether the menus are intuitive and logical, and assesses the remote control where applicable.

Reception The radios are placed in an RF anechoic chamber to ensure they aren't subject to interference, and our tester uses a special broadcasting device to produce a signal of known power. He reduces signal strength to the point where the radio can no longer produce sound without obvious break-up. He then increases the signal strength by very small increments until the sound is clear. This measures the radio's ability to handle a poor signal.

Standby energy Our tester measures the radio's standby energy use with the display at minimum brightness.

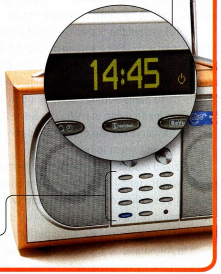


PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE					FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Reception score (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Speakers	iPod dock	Remote control	Line out socket	Live radio pause / rewind	Internet radio / music streaming / wireless networking	Dimensions (cm. H x W x D)*	Weight (kg)**
Pure Evoke-2S	72	85	58	70	60	Stereo			√	√		22 x 29.5 x 12.5	2.7
Pure Avanti Flow	65	75	69	70	0	Stereo	√	√			√	12 x 35 x 24	4.3
Pure One Elite	58	60	52	60	60	Stereo				√		15.5 x 25.5 x 10	1.2
Pure Evoke Flow	57	70	55	60	0	Mono	(A)		√		√	15 x 21 x 11.5	1.5
Roberts Stream 202	57	65	56	60	20	Stereo				√	√	18 x 27 x 10.5	1.5
OXX Digital Classic + DAB	56	65	59	60	0	Mono			√	√	√	13.5 x 25 x 15	2.2
Revo iblik Radio Station	55	55	63	70	0	Mono	√	√	√	√	√	7.5 x 25.5 x 13.5	0.7
Pure Chronos II	51	45	49	60	60	Mono						6.5 x 19 x 17.5	0.5
Pure Siesta	51	50	48	50	60	Mono						6 x 17 x 14.5	0.4

What to look for

Batteries provide portability as well as making the radio a useful information source if the power goes out. Normal batteries (such as AA) are a better option than battery packs because they're easier to replace.

A **clock with an alarm** is useful for waking up in the morning, but can also be used to remind you that a program you want to hear is about to start. Digital radios can update their clock time from the broadcast, so they should keep accurate time and recover better than an analog radio after a power outage. All radios on test have a clock and at least one alarm.



DIGITAL RADIO FEATURES

- **Screen size and shape** are important so you can easily see the scrolling text. None of the radios on test has a colour display, which may be an issue once album covers and other graphics are broadcast.
- **USB connection** In most cases, this allows you to do firmware upgrades if necessary (see Keeping Up with the Data, page 36).
- **iPod dock** The Pure Avanti Flow and Revo have one built-in, but they're both expensive models.
- A **line-out socket** is useful if you want to connect your radio to a more powerful sound system.
- A **headphone socket** is good for listening on your own. All models on test have one.
- The **remote control** should have buttons big enough to press without touching the adjacent ones, and clear labels.
- **Wireless networking (Wi-Fi)** maintains the radio's portability if you are interested in **streaming** programs or music you've recorded and stored on your computer or **internet radio**, which opens up a huge number of radio programs from around the world.
- **Channel presets** allow you to select your favourite stations and assign them to a button or special listing in the radio's menu.

Digital station presets	Alarms	Display (lines x characters)	Display dimensions (mm, W x H)	Batteries	Carry handle	Contact	Price ($)
50	1	2 x 22	62 x 18	(B)	√	www.pure.com	699
30	2	6 x 24	66 x 35			www.pure.com	999
25	1	2 x 16	60 x 20	6xC (B)		www.pure.com	299
30	2	6 x 24	66 x 35	(B)	√	www.pure.com	699
5	2	6 x 24	63 x 30	6xD	√	www.robertsradio.com.au	499
10	2	4 x 16	66 x 25			www.oxxdigital.com	299
10	2	2 x 18	61 x 21			www.bushaustralia.com.au	449
10	4	2 x 16	94 x 21			www.pure.com	249
8	3	2 x 16	65 x 24			www.pure.com	199

USING THE TABLE

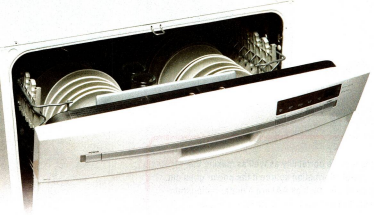
Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Sound quality: 40%
- Ease of use: 25%
- Reception: 25%
- Standby energy use: 10%

Price Recommended retail, as of April 2009.

TABLE NOTES

** Rounded up to nearest 0.5cm, in open configuration if applicable.*
*** Including power lead, if not detachable; rounded to nearest 0.1kg.*
ns Not stated.
(A) Available as an optional extra.
(B) Accepts a proprietary rechargeable battery pack.



Sleek and slim

Slimline dishwashers may be sleek but they're not so slim on price.

nutshell

- Slimline dishwashers can cost as much to buy and run as their full-sized counterparts.
- If you can't fit a full-sized model, a slimline or compact could still save you water, money and time compared with washing by hand.
- We've added 11 newly tested models, including three slimlines, to our report and we can recommend three in particular.

Many people with small kitchens avoid installing a dishwasher, but where space is an issue, some slimline models are as compact as 45cm wide and can fit neatly under a benchtop. Research has shown that using a dishwasher can cut your water use and costs compared with washing by hand, so squeezing in one of these models may save you money in the long run and free up time for more important things.

CHOICE tested the Fisher & Paykel single DishDrawer; a six-place setting machine that uses a mere seven litres of water per wash – less than a sink full of water. Also on test are three slimline models that fit nine- or 10-place settings and use up to 16 litres of water. Two made it into our What to Buy list, however the DishDrawer is the top performer in this category and also the cheapest to buy and run.

Full-sized machines have slightly better energy and water efficiency and are possibly cheaper than compact or slimline ones. Choose one with a good auto-sensing or half-load option so you can wash daily without guilt. Our latest top performer, the Bosch Lifestyle Automatic SMS63M08AU, fits the bill, or check out the table on page 42 for other energy- and water-efficient models. >

What to buy

A best buy is a good performer from a brand with a good reliability record, and whose combined purchase price and running cost is among the lowest in the test. The Whirlpool ADP6000WH's purchase price has dropped since our last report and has a very low running cost, so it now qualifies as a best buy.

STANDARD SIZE

# Bosch Lifestyle Automatic SMS63M08AU	$1679
Asko D3122	$1399
Miele G 1243 SC	$1799
Whirlpool ADP6000WH	$639

COMPACT/SLIMLINE

Fisher & Paykel DishDrawer DS605ZW	$1029
Miele G1102 SC	$1699
Smeg STA945-3	$1890

 # Indicates a newly tested model.

What to buy

The models that newly made it into the What to Buy list are profiled below and right. For the other models in the What to Buy list see *CHOICE* February 2009, or go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on our Emagazine for issues from November 2008.

Standard size

81% Bosch LifeStyle Automatic SMS63M08AU

PRICE $1679

GOOD POINTS

- Top performer overall, with excellent drying and water efficiency.
- Very quiet.
- IntensiveZone feature washes pots and pans in lower basket and normally soiled dishes in top basket.
- Features small and light item holders – great for small plastic containers.
- The sensor program works well for energy, water and time savings.
- Has a movable cutlery basket that can be placed anywhere in the bottom basket.
- Top basket can be height-adjusted very easily, even when fully loaded.
- Low running costs.
- Child lock on door and controls.

BAD POINTS

- Achieved only 67% for washing performance.

77% Whirlpool ADP6000WH

PRICE $639

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent drying performance and very good water efficiency.
- Top basket can be height-adjusted very easily, even when fully loaded.
- Has delayed start, time-to-go display.

BAD POINTS

- Scored only 64% for washing performance.
- No auto-sensing program or half-load option for smaller loads.
- Noisier than most others in this test.
- Needs to be anchored to prevent it from tipping forward when loaded baskets are pulled out.

What to buy

Compact / slimline

77% Fisher & Paykel DishDrawer DS605ZW

PRICE $1029
TYPE Compact single drawer

GOOD POINTS
- Top performer in its size category.
- Excellent drying performance and very good water efficiency.
- Has delayed start, time-to-go display and a child lock for the controls.

BAD POINTS
- Limited internal height – check your dinner plates fit before buying.
- Scored only 64% for washing performance.
- Noisier than most other models in this test.

75% Miele G 1102 SC

PRICE $1699
TYPE Slimline

GOOD POINTS
- Good overall score and good washing and water-efficiency scores.
- Very good drying score.
- Largest number of place settings for a slimline machine.
- Top basket can be height-adjusted very easily, even when fully loaded.
- Quiet.
- Child lock on door.
- Has a cutlery tray.

BAD POINTS
- Scored only 63% for energy use.
- Costs as much as a standard model.
- Sensor program works only OK – saves time and water, but not much on energy when washing cleaner dishes.

73% Smeg STA945-3

PRICE $1890
TYPE Slimline

GOOD POINTS
- Good overall score.
- Good washing, drying and water-efficiency scores.
- Short normal program time.

BAD POINTS
- Scored only 61% for energy use.
- Noisier than most others in this test.

About the rest

The following refers only to the newly tested models – to find out more about machines tested previously, see the table on page 42.

- The Dishlex DX203WK is a no-frills, good overall performer that is cheap to buy. It has a delay start feature and a child lock on the controls, but is noisy.
- The Electrolux EX601SC has heavy water and energy use. It has delay start and time-to go display, although they're on top of the door and are tricky to see when installed. Also, its auto-sensing program doesn't reduce energy, water or time when washing cleaner dishes.
- The Ariston LV645A, Omega DW601XA and Smeg SA8210X7 all scored well overall, but the first two are let down by their washing scores of 61% and 62% respectively, while the Smeg scored only 59% for drying (but has an above-average washing score). The Omega is one of the most energy-efficient models on test and has a delay start and time-to-go display, but is also one of the noisiest. The Smeg has a delay start and one side of its top basket can easily be adjusted when loaded. The Ariston is also noisy.
- The LG LD1420T1 performed well overall but has a very long cycle time and its auto program doesn't make any savings when washing cleaner dishes. However, it has a top basket that can be adjusted easily while loaded, a time-to-go and a delay start feature.
- The Blanco BFD8W and slimline Ariston LL42 are both let down by low drying scores, 38% and 60% respectively, and below-average washing scores. Both have delay start, and the Blanco has an easily adjustable top basket that can be adjusted when fully loaded.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre (NSW) assessed the newly tested models for suitability for people with certain disabilities.

- For people with upper limb dysfunction, the Electrolux EX601SC and slimline Miele G 1102 SC are best as they have easy-to-use controls and detergent dispensers, are easy to clean and the baskets are easy to pull in and out. But the Electrolux has an edge over the Miele with its easy-to-open door.
- For the vision-impaired, none are ideal but the best are the Dishlex DX203WK and Bosch SMS63M08AU, as they have good contrast between their various internal components, including the detergent and rinse aid dispensers (the Bosch being a little better). Their controls are also slightly better visually and audibly – again, the Bosch is a little ahead of the Dishlex.
- For those with cognitive impairment, the Dishlex DX203WK and slimline Ariston LL42 are best, with simple, clear controls and individual components, such as the detergent dispenser, being simple to use.

choice shopper

To get the best deal on a dishwasher, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 655, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number. The full selection of models in this test may not be available in all states.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE									FEATURES					
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Washing performance score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Drying performance score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Water used (L)	Energy used (kWh)	Noise (dB)	Cycle time (min)	Auto program / dirt sensor	Easily height-adjustable top basket	Foldable / removable tines	Anti-flood hose	Half-load option	Eco wash
STANDARD SIZE															
# Bosch LifeStyle Automatic SMS63M08AU	81	67	96	93	76	12	1.10	37	125	✓	✓	F	✓	✓	
Asko D3122	79	74	82	97	60	17	1.63	50	148						✓
Miele G 1243 SC (A)	79	76	79	97	66	18	1.44	41	144	✓	✓	F, R	✓		
# Dishlex DX203WK	78	74	81	91	66	17	1.44	50	100						✓
AEG F40760 Favorit Sensorlogic (A) (B)	78	88	61	91	60	25	1.62	48	115	✓	✓	F	✓		✓
Dishlex DX103WK	77	78	72	95	57	21	1.73	48	113						✓
Fisher & Paykel DishDrawer DD605ZW	77	64	88	91	73	15	1.19	48	112		na	R		✓	✓
Miele G 2243 SCi (A) (C)	77	74	77	94	65	19	1.48	41	142	✓	✓	F, R	✓		
Whirlpool ADP6000WH	77	64	84	92	79	16	1.02	49	149		✓	F	✓		✓
Westinghouse SB908WL (A) (D)	76	73	80	87	65	18	1.45	47	99						✓
Asko D3132	75	63	98	79	66	11	1.43	46	171	✓		F			✓
Blanco BFD10X	75	65	86	91	64	15	1.49	43	105	✓	✓	F	✓		✓
Fisher & Paykel DW60DOX1	75	69	88	78	64	15	1.49	36	147	✓	✓	F	✓		✓ (J)
Maytag MJD 7556 (A)	75	62	88	90	69	14	1.32	47	171	✓	✓	F	✓	✓	
Smeg STH905 (A) (E)	75	59	99	80	74	10	1.16	45	101	✓	na	F	✓	✓	✓
Baumatic BAD6002 (F)	74	61	85	78	83	16	0.88	53	135		✓	F		✓	
Electrolux E:line EX4401SB (A)	74	81	61	86	59	25	1.66	49	116	✓	✓	F	✓		✓
# Electrolux EX601SC	73	78	66	81	59	23	1.65	45	115	✓		F	✓		✓
AEG F806080Fum (A)	73	85	59	77	61	26	1.60	43	112	✓	✓	F	✓		✓
Miele G 1143 SC	73	78	69	77	58	22	1.71	42	145	✓	✓	F	✓		
Miele G1173SCVi	73	73	76	82	57	19	1.74	45	143	✓	✓	F	✓		
Whirlpool ADP7000	73	75	84	51	81	16	0.93	53	130		✓	F	✓	✓	
# Ariston LV645A	72	61	89	72	74	14	1.17	49	95			F	✓		✓
# Omega DW601XA	72	62	85	68	83	16	0.87	54	135			F		✓	
# Smeg SA8210X7	72	75	80	59	67	18	1.40	47	101		✓	F		✓	✓
Blanco BFD9W (G)	72	68	83	74	64	16	1.51	45	103	✓	✓	F	✓		✓
Miele G 1023	72	67	77	81	65	19	1.48	43	134	✓	✓	F	✓		
# LG LD1420T1	70	63	79	80	60	18	1.63	44	161	✓	✓	F, R	✓	✓	✓
Smeg SA8605 X	70	76	77	55	64	19	1.5	47	105		✓	F	✓	✓	✓
Blanco BFD 5W	69	50	99	71	69	11	1.35	42	66		✓	F	✓	✓	✓
LG LD-1204W1 (A)	69	62	83	50	88	16	0.71	46	110			F		✓	✓
Haier HDW100WHT (H)	67	53	97	40	89	11	0.67	55	96						
# Blanco BFD8W	66	64	88	38	75	15	1.13	44	126		✓	F			✓
Fisher & Paykel DW60CDW2	64	58	83	45	75	16	1.14	50	108		✓	F			✓
Haier HDW300SS	64	52	97	37	79	11	0.99	59	97			F		✓	
SLIMLINE / COMPACT															
Fisher & Paykel DishDrawer DS605ZW	77	64	88	91	73	7	0.60	48	112		na	R		✓	✓
# Miele G 1102 SC	75	73	75	89	63	16	1.27	41	130	✓	✓	F, R	✓		
# Smeg STA945-3	73	78	75	70	61	15	1.21	51	94			F		✓	
# Ariston LL42	67	61	85	60	65	12	1.11	50	100					✓	

CIFICATIONS							COSTS		
(cm, H x W x D)	Water connection	Place settings	Type*	Colour*	Contact		Running cost ($ / 10 years)	Running cost + price ($)	Price ($)*
60 x 60	C only	14	FW	SS	www.bosch.com.au		722	2401	1679
60 x 57	C rec	14	BI	W	www.asko.com.au		1075	2774	1699
60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	W	www.miele.com.au		962	2861	1899
60 x 58	C rec	12	FW	W	www.dishlex.com.au		976	1825	849
60 x 60	C only	12	FW	SS	www.electrolux.com.au		1098	2197	1099
60 x 61	C rec	12	FW	W	www.dishlex.com.au		1148	1887	739
60 x 57	C rec	12	BI	W	www.fp.com.au		813	2612	1799
60 x 57	H or C	14	BI (SI)	W	www.miele.com.au		985	3184	2199
60 x 58	H or C	12	FW	W	www.whirlpool.com.au		711	1350	639
60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	W	www.westinghouse.com.au		990	1889	899
60 x 57	C rec	14	BI (SI)	W	www.asko.com.au		947	2696	1749
60 x 57	C rec	13	FW	W	www.blanco-australia.com		997	2896	1899
60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	SS	www.fp.com.au		1048	2728	1680
60 x 59	H or C	12	BI (FI)	FI	www.maytag.com.au		871	2470	1599
86 x 55	C only	12	BI	W	www.smeg.com.au		758	3748	2990
60 x 60	C only	12	FW	W	www.baumatic.com.au		605	1704	1099
60 x 58	C rec	12	BI (SI)	SS	www.electrolux.com.au		1118	2497	1379
60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	SS	www.electrolux.com.au		1128	2767	1639
60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	SS	www.electrolux.com.au		1084	2683	1599
60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	W	www.miele.com.au		1140	2839	1699
60 x 57	C or H	12	BI (FI)	FI	www.miele.com.au		1171	2970	1799
60 x 54	C or H	12	BI (FI)	FI	www.whirlpool.com.au		686	1815	1129
60 x 57	C rec	12	BI	SS	www.aristonchannel.com		795	1944	1149
60 x 58	C rec	12	FW	SS	www.omega.com.au		612	1561	949
60 x 57	C rec	12	FW	SS	www.smeg.com.au		934	2224	1290
60 x 57	H or C	13	FW	W	www.blanco-australia.com		1009	2608	1599
60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	W	www.miele.com.au		985	2284	1299
60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	SS	www.lge.com.au		1076	2525	1449
60 x 57	H or C	14	BI	W	www.smeg.com.au		998	2688	1690
60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	W	www.blanco-australia.com		874	2173	1299
60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	W	www.lge.com.au		512	1411	899
60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	W	www.haier.net.au		458	1157	699
60 x 57	C rec	13	FW	W	www.blanco-australia.com		785	2164	1379
60 x 60	C rec	12	FW	W	www.fp.com.au		770	1809	1039
60 x 60	C or H	12	FW	SS	www.haier.com.au		671	1570	899
60 X 57	C rec	6	BI	W	www.fp.com.au		407	1436	1029
45 x 60	H or C	10	FW	W	www.miele.com.au		844	2543	1699
45 x 55	H or C	9	BI (FI)	FI	www.smeg.com.au		801	2691	1890
45 x 60	C rec	9	FW	W	www.aristonchannel.com		749	2048	1299

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Washing performance: 40%
- Water efficiency: 25%
- Drying performance: 20%
- Energy efficiency: 15%

Noise All the dishwashers are fairly quiet, but a difference of 3dB is noticeable to the human ear.

Features See What to Look For, page 44.

Water connection

- **H or C** You can connect the dishwasher to hot or cold water.
- **C rec** The manufacturer recommends connecting to a cold tap, and the dishwasher heats the water itself (all dishwashers have a heater).
- **C only** You can only connect the dishwasher to a cold tap.

Type

- **FW** Freestanding, with a worktop (can generally be inbuilt as well).
- **BI** Built-in – might not have top or side panels; must be enclosed and anchored to prevent it from tipping forward when fully loaded and dish racks are pulled out.
- **SI** Semi-integrated – you fit a panel to the door under the controls' fascia to match the rest of your kitchen cupboard doors
- **FI** Fully integrated – the whole front of the machine can match your kitchen, with controls hidden inside the door.

Running costs This is an estimate of how much the dishwasher will cost over 10 years for water and electricity if you wash a full load every day using a normal or auto-sensing cycle, based on 17 cents per kWh for electricity and $1 per 1000L water.

Price Recommended retail, as of March 2009.

TABLE NOTES

 # Indicates a newly tested model.
** Where possible, we've listed the white model code and price. Most models are available in other colours, finishes or types – usually at a higher price. Where the model numbers are different we've listed them below. The colour given for SI models is for the control panel.*
SS *Indicates any metallic or metallic look finish; not all models are actually stainless steel.*
na *Not applicable – only has one basket, or in the case of the Fisher & Paykel double DishDrawer DD605ZW, two separate baskets whose height doesn't affect the other.*
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.
(B) The AEG F40860M, F44080M and F60850VIM are technically similar to the AEG F40760 and will perform the same on the tested program. All models are discontinued but may be available in some stores.
(C) The Miele G 2243 SCi is technically similar to the G 2243SCu and G 2283 SCVi and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type, colour and features.
(D) The Westinghouse SB916WL and SB916SL are technically similar to the SB908WL on test and will perform the same on the tested program. The SB916s have an anti-flood hose, fold-down racks, delay start and are claimed to be quieter. All models have been superseded, but may be available in some stores.
(E) The Smeg is wider and shorter than a standard dishwasher and has only one basket, but still 12 place settings.
(F) The Baumatic BAD6002 is technically similar to the Lofra LOD6001 (RRP $1139) and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type and colour.
(G) The Blanco BFD9VI, BFD9X, BSD9X and BID11 are technically similar and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type and colour.
(H) The Haier HDW101WHT, HDW1005SST and HDW101SST are technically similar and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type, colour and features.
(J) Cannot be selected by user – wash cycle is chosen by auto-sensing program.

What to look for

ESSENTIAL FEATURES

- Will your normal dinnerware **fit into the dishwasher** without crowding or hitting the spray arms? Take a few of your everyday dishes, such as a large dinner plate and tall glass, and try them out in the store to check they both fit at the same time. Spin the spray arms to make sure they don't hit the plate or glass.

USEFUL FEATURES

- **Cutlery trays** are available only on some Miele models (denoted by SC in the model number). These are good for large utensils, and cutlery can be grouped on the tray as you load the machine, making unloading easier. They may also be safer by reducing the risk of stabs from knives and forks in standard cutlery baskets.
- **Easily adjustable top basket** Almost all top baskets are height-adjustable, but if it is an "easy-adjust" system you can do this without removing the basket and refitting it in a lower or higher position. Only a few can be adjusted when loaded.
- **Fold-down/removable plate racks** can help when loading pots and awkward items. Fold-down types are easier as they don't need external storage space when not in use.
- An **anti-flood hose** has an electric cut-off near the water tap connection, which means it stops leaks in the hose, not just in the machine. An anti-flood hose is high-level protection.
- A **concealed heating element** stops items being damaged if they fall through the basket – particularly plastics – and also means food cannot drop onto the element and cause a burning smell. All except the Haier HDW100WHT and Dishlex DX203WK have one.
- **Cutlery basket** An anti-nesting grid helps stop the cutlery pieces from nesting, to enable a better wash. For added versatility, look for a cutlery basket that can be placed anywhere in the bottom basket.
- **Controls and labelling** The controls should be easy to use and the labelling intuitive and clear. Look for engraved or etched labels on stainless steel so they don't come off when cleaning. Only use water and a microfibre cloth on bonded labelling.

HOW RELIABLE DO SUBSCRIBERS RATE THEIR BRAND?

We asked subscribers whether their dishwasher (bought in or after 2000) had needed repairs in the previous 12 months. Overall, 15% had, making dishwashers the most unreliable appliance in our survey. The numbers in brackets are the number of responses we received for that brand. Differences of 9% or more are statistically significant. Unfortunately, we didn't receive enough responses to publish reliability information for AEG and Baumatic models.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR	%
All dishwashers (5049)	85
Bosch (318)	95
Miele (697)	92
Whirlpool (152)	90
Westinghouse (414)	89
Simpson (146)	88
Blanco (127)	87
Dishlex/Electrolux Dishlex (790)	87
Asko (350)	83
Fisher & Paykel (830)	80
Smeg (140)	79
LG (288)	75
Kleenmaid (152)	71

HOW WE TEST

Washing performance Our testers check the machines' performance by placing equal amounts of egg yolk, spinach and baby cereal on plates, butter on saucers, tomato juice in glasses and tea in cups. They also put egg yolk and cereal onto cutlery, all of which are left to dry for 15-18 hours before being washed (using the sensor program if the machine has it or normal cycle if not) and dried. Each machine is tested at least twice and the scores averaged. The score is based on the number of specks of food left on the dishes or the area of the larger stains.

Drying performance The drying performance score is based on the number of drops and/or streaks left on the dishes half an hour after the end of the wash. There are no plastic items in our load as these take a very long time to dry.

Water and energy efficiency Testers also measure the amount of water and energy used in a cycle, and the time taken.

Big wheels cornering the market

When it comes to safety, don't compromise on car tyre quality.

nutshell

- On test: 14 full sets of tyres for large cars.
- Wet cornering scores are quite low in all models, so slow down in wet weather.

When Isobel, a CHOICE staff member, had to replace the front tyres on her small car, she decided to go with the advice of a tyre dealer and bought mid-priced tyres of a little known brand. Everything seemed fine until the first wet day when the tyres spun, especially on hills. She soon learnt to adapt her driving style on wet days in order to get traction. But it wasn't until she moved the front two tyres to the rear and bought two from a different brand for the front that her problem ceased. Even professional advice can go awry occasionally, which is why our wet cornering and braking scores are so important (see Cornering and Braking, below).

What to buy $

BFGoodrich Sport T/A	$167
Goodyear Excellence	$215
GT Radial Champiro 228	$180
Goodyear Assurance	$191
Kumho Solus KH15	$175

We tested 14 sets of size 215/60 R16 95V and 95H tyres, costing $115–$215 per tyre (see What to Look For, page 47, for details). This size is currently used on at least some versions of a number of popular large cars, such as the Toyota Aurion and Camry, Ford Falcon XT (our test car), Honda Accord, Hyundai Sonata and the Mitsubishi 380 Series III.

Depending on the amount of driving you do, you can expect to buy a set of new tyres every couple of years. Be sure to check the tread wear indicators regularly, or ask your service centre to do it for you.

Cornering and braking

It's worth looking closely at the wet cornering scores on page 46. We found that scores ranged from poor to only OK, which means in an emergency situation the car could be in danger not only of drifting into the other lane, but going off the road entirely. Even two of our highest-scoring models, the BFGoodrich and Goodyear Assurance, scored only 50% for wet cornering. In this and all our previous tests, the tyres consistently scored poorly for wet cornering, so even with good-performing tyres overall, it's best to always slow down in wet weather to reduce your risk of accident.

The difference between the best and worst braking distances in wet or dry conditions is about four metres at speeds of 80km/h. In an emergency, this can mean the difference between life and serious injury, so look at the braking scores to assess how well the tyres perform. >

HOW WE TEST

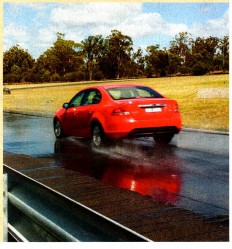
Our cornering tests are carried out with the car's traction control disabled. CHOICE does not recommend disabling traction control as it aids the car's handling and safety in extreme circumstances.

Cornering Our testers assess how well the tyres keep the car in the set lane, at speeds of 75km/h and 80km/h in dry and wet conditions, using a right-hand corner with about 55m radius.

The tests are carried out without the driver knowing which tyre is fitted and in random order. The testers repeat the cornering on a different day and in a different random order. They also use a control (two sets of the same model) as an additional check for variations in the test that aren't due to model differences.

Braking Using a GPS system, our testers measure the distance to come to a complete standstill in emergency braking tests from driving speeds of 50km/h and 80km/h, in both dry and wet conditions.

Rolling noise Our testers also carry out rolling noise measurements at the driver's left ear at 50km/h and 80km/h, on a public road. At each speed there is only up to 3dB difference between the models – so small you wouldn't be able to notice it in a car. However, the tyres on test are new, and bigger differences may develop with increased wear.



We'd like to thank **Morgan Park Raceway** in Warwick, Qld, for ensuring a smooth test, and **Ford** for generously lending us the test vehicle.

The real-life wear of a tyre depends on a number of factors, such as the road surface, tyre pressure, wheel alignment and driving style.

What to buy

74% BFGoodrich Sport T/A

PRICE $167

73% Goodyear Excellence

PRICE $215

73% GT Radial Champiro 228

PRICE $180

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS		
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Wet cornering score (%)	Dry cornering score (%)	Wet braking score (%)	Dry braking score (%)	Speed rating	Contact	Price ($)
BFGoodrich Sport T/A	74	50	80	80	95	H	www.bfgoodrich.com.au	167
Goodyear Excellence	73	60	75	75	85	V	www.goodyear.com.au	215
GT Radial Champiro 228	73	65	75	70	85	V	www.gtradial.com.au	180
Goodyear Assurance	72	50	75	80	90	V	www.goodyear.com.au	191
Kumho Solus KH15	71	65	70	70	80	V	www.kumho.com.au	175
Kelly Ritmo HP (A)	66	50	70	70	80	H	www.goodyear.com.au	145
Michelin Energy XM1+	66	50	70	70	80	H	www.michelin.com.au	188
Firestone Firehawk TZ100	65	45	65	70	90	V	www.bridgestone.com.au	195
Maxxis Radial MA-651	65	50	65	70	80	H	1300 120 120	130
Dunlop SP Sport 200E	64	50	65	65	80	V	www.dunloptyres.com.au	173
Hankook Optimo K415	63	40	70	65	85	V	www.hankooktyre.com.au	145
Sime Astar 300	62	40	65	65	85	V	www.htrdistribution.com.au	115
Toyo TEO Plus Eco	62	40	70	65	80	H	www.toyo.com.au	160
Continental ComfortContact-1	60	40	65	60	80	V	www.continentaltyres.com.au	200

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Wet cornering: 30%
- Dry cornering: 30%
- Wet braking: 20%
- Dry braking: 20%

Price Recommended retail as of May 2009. Tyre prices can vary widely, so shop around.

TABLE NOTES

(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores.
H/V See What to Look For, right.

72% Goodyear Assurance

PRICE $191

71% Kumho Solus KH15

PRICE $175

About the rest

We test the tyres in fairly extreme situations that you'd normally only encounter in emergencies. In everyday driving conditions, all the models on test are likely to be OK, and the differences indicated by our scores may not be noticeable.

However, it's arguable that emergency performance is what really counts. Tyres in our What to Buy list have better wet cornering scores than others, as most other performance scores of the recommended models range from good to excellent.

As you can see from the range of prices, paying more doesn't necessarily mean you get a better tyre.

What to look for

TYRE MARKINGS

Each tyre has standard markings that allow you to pick the right type for your car. It's a confusing mix of letters and numbers, and of measurements in millimetres and inches.

Here's what it all means, using the code for one of the tested sizes, P215/60 R16 95H.

P stands for passenger tyre.

60 is a percentage describing the tyre's profile or aspect ratio. It's the ratio between the tyre's section height (distance from the wheel bead seat to the top of the tyre) and its section width – in this case 60%.

16 refers to the diameter (in inches) of the rim the tyre fits.

H this is the speed rating index and tells you the maximum speed the tyre can travel at (in this case, 210km/h). Other examples: S (180km/h), T (190km/h), V (240km/h), W (270km/h).

215 is the section width (in mm) when the tyre is fitted to the recommended rim, and inflated to the recommended pressure, and not under load. The section width is the distance between the tyre's exterior sidewalls.

R stands for radial, which is the most common construction method for passenger car tyres.

95 is the load rating index and tells you the maximum weight one tyre can carry (in this case, it means 690kg). Other examples: 84 (500kg), 86 (530kg), 89 (580kg), 92 (630kg), 94 (670kg).

TREAD WEAR RATING

Tyre models that are marketed in the US must have a **tread wear rating** as part of the Uniform Tyre Quality Grading (UTQG) system operated by the US government's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. If the same tyre is available here you can use the information too – it's printed on the tyre sidewall.

Under the system, a tyre's tread wear is measured under controlled conditions involving an 11,500km drive on a specified test course, and compared with a "standard" tyre with a rating of 100. A rating of 200 indicates the tested tyre should last twice as long as the standard model. So the higher the number, the longer you can expect a tyre to last.

However, the rating is only comparative. Real-life wear of a tyre depends on a number of aspects, such as the road surface, tyre pressure, wheel alignment and driving style.

Also part of the UTQG system (and printed next to the tread wear rating) are:

- A **traction rating** that grades the tyre's wet braking traction (AA, A, B or C, with AA being best).
- A **temperature rating**, which indicates a tyre's ability to dissipate heat (A, B, C, with A being best).

Sharpest tool in the shed

Keep your knives sharp – and your fingers safe.

nutshell

- On a couple of models, the only thing protecting your fingers from the knife blade is a removable guard.
- Multistage sharpeners achieve the sharpest possible edge, but in most cases you pay more.

Keeping your knives sharp not only makes your job as master chef at home easier and quicker, but much safer too. If your knife is blunt, there's a danger it could slip from the food you're cutting and slice through your fingers.

Refining the already-sharp edge of your knife on a honing steel is a handy interim measure but eventually, depending on how often you use your knives, honing will no longer be enough to keep the blade sharp as the edge degrades with use. One of the safest ways to test whether your knife is sharp enough is to cut through a soft tomato. If it's sharp, it will slice through easily. If it requires pressure to cut, then it's time to run your knife through a sharpener. Eventually your knives may need professional sharpening, which can be done at most good cookware shops.

To determine which knife sharpeners currently on the market are the best at sharpening and safest to operate, CHOICE put three electric and 13 manual models ranging in price from $4 to $199 to the test.

Seven models achieve a smooth, finely honed edge on our test knives. Our top model is the three-stage, semi-professional Cuisinart, which is also the most expensive. One of the recommended models, the Kuhn Rikon Kyocera, didn't sharpen to an acceptable level with the first sample. Our tester discovered the stone wheels had separated, so we retested a second sample and got a much better result.

Safe sharpening

A knife sharpener with one-handed operation where you don't need to keep a hand on the sharpener is safest, according to our CHOICE tester, as the knife can't potentially slip and injure the operator. He also discovered safety concerns with some of the models on test.

Take special care using the Accusharp and Saphire, as the only thing protecting your fingers from the knife blade is a removable finger guard. While the Victorinox also has a finger guard, it's wider and can't be removed, making it safer.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			SPECIFICATIONS		FEATURES
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Performance (%)	Ease of use (%)	Sharpening stages	Sharpening material	Serrated knife use
Cuisinart KS-80A	91	90	91	3	Stone	✓
Anolon Universal Sharpener	86	90	82	3	Stone	
Breville BKS6000 Ikon	86	90	82	1	Ceramic	
Chef's Choice Two Stage Sharpener 450	86	90	82	2	Diamond	
Furi Ozitech Diamond Fingers Knife Sharpening System FUR626	85	90	80	1	Diamond	
Minosharp Water Sharpener 220/GB	85	90	80	2	Stone	
Kuhn Rikon Kyocera Knife Sharpener KR-2941	84	90	77	1	Stone	
Scanpan Sharpener Classic 3 Step Knife Sharpener	80	80	80	3	Tungsten carbide, diamond and ceramic	
Zwilling J.A. Henckels Twinsharp 32590-200 Blue	79	90	68	2	Tungsten carbide and ceramic	
Victorinox Knife Sharpener 7.8715	73	80	66	1	Tungsten carbide	
Wiltshire WILT595064 Knife Sharpener	71	90	52	1	Tungsten carbide	
Accusharp Knife and Tool Sharpener	68	80	55	1	Tungsten carbide	✓
Smart Chef Knife Sharpener with Grindstone	68	80	55	1	Stone	
Russell Hobbs RHKS1000	67	60	73	1	Stone	✓ (+scissors
Saphire Knife and Tool Sharpener	62	60	64	1	Tungsten carbide	
Wusthof Knife Sharpener 4344 (ceramic)	57	40	73	1	Ceramic	

The Smart Chef and Wiltshire, which you're meant to hold on the bench while you sharpen, don't have anti-slip material on their bases. This may be dangerous as they could slide around during operation.

Any model that sits on the benchtop requires extra attention to ensure the knife doesn't slip out of the sharpening slot, cutting into the bench surface – place the sharpener on a chopping board to protect your benchtop.

Keep your knives sharp

Regularly hone your knives to keep their cutting edge fine, and be sure to clean the blade afterwards to remove any filings. To avoid blunting or nicking the blade, use a soft chopping board, such as wood or plastic. Store your knives in a knife block, or if you keep them in a drawer, use a guard to protect the blade from being knocked and chipped. Don't leave food to dry on the knife blade – acidic foods such as lemon can permanently stain it. Many manufacturers claim their products are dishwasher-safe, but if you want to be on the safe side, hand wash and dry them immediately to avoid water spots appearing. >

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:
- Performance: 50%
- Ease of use: 50%

Features See What to Look For, right.

Price Recommended retail, as of April 2009.

use	Manual / electric	Contact	Price ($)
er	E	www.cuisinart.com.au	199
nt	M	www.anolon.com.au	80
nt	E	www.breville.com.au	115
er	M	www.oppenheimer.com.au	60
er	M	www.furitechnics.com.au	50
er	M	02 9482 6666	60
er	M	www.kuhnrikon.com	32
er	M	www.scanpan.com.au	60
nt	M	www2.dksh.com	43
er	M	www.oppenheimer.com.au	36
er	M	www.mcpher.com.au	30
er	M	www.pacificrimdistributors.com.au	39
er	M	www.smartchef.com.au	4
er	E	www.salton.com.au	40
er	M	www.kingofknives.com	35
er	M	www.wusthof.com.au	80

HOW WE TEST

Our tester uses a new Victorinox Fibrox 20cm chef knife for each sharpener. Each knife is tested for sharpness on arrival from the manufacturer and then put through a blunting process. Our tester sharpens each knife according to manufacturers' instructions, however if the desired sharpness is not achieved, it's continued until the edge is found to be sharp.

Performance After sharpening, each blade is assessed by slicing an A4 sheet of paper from the edge (the knife should slice through without tearing), and cutting the skin of a tomato (it should slide through cleanly and smoothly mostly under the weight of the knife).

Ease of use This is a combination of ease of sharpening the knife, ease of reading and following the instructions, and how safe the sharpener is to use.

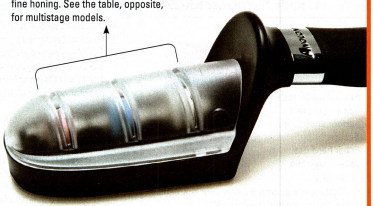
You should hone your knives regularly to keep their cutting edge fine, and make sure you clean the blade afterwards to remove any filings.

What to look for

KNIFE SHARPENER FEATURES

- **Multipurpose** Some knife sharpeners can sharpen other tools as well. The Russell Hobbs model claims to sharpen scissors and screwdrivers – although we didn't find it particularly good at sharpening our test knife. The Russell Hobbs, Accusharp and Cuisinart also claim to sharpen serrated-edge knives.
- **Sharpening materials** Sharpeners using stone, ceramic and diamond materials achieve a fine, honed edge, whereas those using tungsten carbide tear material along the edge of the knife, leaving microscopic serrations. This serration cuts well initially, but the knife blade may wear out quicker as they tend to remove more metal from the blade.
- **Left-/right-hand use** Most models allow left- and right-hand use, although the Anolon, Breville and Zwilling J.A. Henckels are right-hand use only.

Multistage The best edge is achieved with a multistage sharpener, with at least two types of sharpening material – one for coarse grinding and one for fine honing. See the table, opposite, for multistage models.



What to buy

91% Cuisinart KS-80A

PRICE $199

GOOD POINTS

- Safe to use.
- Easy to sharpen with and handle.
- Secure.
- Can be used with either hand.
- Excellent performance score; achieves a smooth edge.
- Easy to maintain.
- Claims to sharpen serrated knives.

BAD POINTS

- Requires electrical connection.

86% Chef's Choice Two Stage Sharpener 450

PRICE $60

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to sharpen with and handle.
- Secure.
- Can be used with either hand.
- Excellent performance score; achieves a smooth edge.
- Easy to maintain.

BAD POINTS

- May damage bench if the knife slides out of sharpening slot.

84% Kuhn Rikon Kyocera Knife Sharpener KR-2941

PRICE $32

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to carry.
- Easy to sharpen with and handle.
- Second model tested had an excellent performance score.
- Secure.
- Either hand use.
- Easy to maintain.

BAD POINTS

- Our first sample achieved a very poor sharpening score, so we retested (see page 60).
- May damage bench if the knife slides out of the sharpening slot.

86% Anolon Universal Sharpener

PRICE $80

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to sharpen with and handle.
- Secure.
- Excellent performance score; achieves a smooth edge.
- Easy to maintain.

BAD POINTS

- May damage the bench if knife slides out of sharpening slot.
- Right-hand use only.

85% Furi Ozitech Diamond Fingers Knife Sharpening System FUR626

PRICE $50

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to carry.
- Safe to use.
- Easy to sharpen with and handle.
- Secure.
- Either hand use.
- Excellent performance score; achieves a smooth edge.
- Easy to maintain.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing to mention.

86% Breville BKS6000 Ikon

PRICE $115

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to sharpen with.
- Excellent performance score; achieves a smooth edge.

BAD POINTS

- Requires electrical connection.
- May damage the bench if the knife slides out of the sharpening slot.
- The switch requires some effort to push.
- Right-hand use only.
- Screwdriver required to clean the wheel housing.

85% Minosharp Water Sharpener 220/GB

PRICE $60

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to sharpen with and handle.
- Secure.
- Can be used in either hand.
- Excellent performance score; achieves a smooth edge.
- Easy to maintain.

BAD POINTS

- May damage bench if the knife slides out of the sharpening slot.

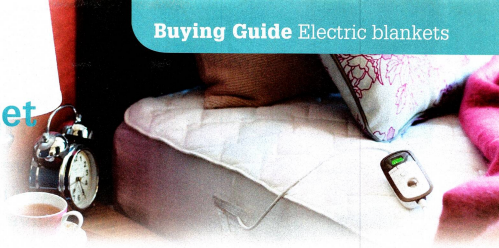
About the rest

All but the Russell Hobbs, Saphire and Wusthof have excellent or very good performance scores, but some considerations for the models not recommended are:

- The Scanpan and Zwilling J.A. Henckels could potentially damage the bench if the knife were to slip out of the sharpening slot.
- The Smart Chef and Wiltshire both have a slippery base, so they may slide around during operation and could also potentially damage the bench if the knife were to slip out of the sharpening slot.
- Extra attention to safety has to be taken with the Victorinox, Accusharp and Saphire as your knuckles move over the edge of the knife when sharpening. The Saphire also has the equal-second-lowest performance score.
- The Russell Hobbs has the equal-second-lowest performance score, although it is the only model to claim to be able to sharpen scissors and a screwdriver.
- The Wusthof received a poor performance score as it did not achieve the desired sharpness in the allocated time and could also potentially damage the bench if the knife were to slip out of the sharpening slot.

The perfect electric blanket

What should you consider before buying an electric blanket?



nutshell

- Modern electric blankets are safe, so features and cost need only be your purchase criteria.
- There are still some important safety precautions you can take.

As temperatures continue to drop this winter, the idea of an electric blanket begins to sound more and more appealing. Past CHOICE tests showed there are no concerns with the electrical safety and durability of modern electric blankets. There is an Australian standard for electric blankets AS/NZS 3350.2.17:2000, so look for it when shopping. Otherwise, your main purchase criteria should be features and cost.

If you just want a basic blanket, any will do the job, so shop around for price – you should pay $30 to $60 for one in shops such as Target, Big W, Kmart and Harvey Norman. Or if you're looking at spending more, CHOICE found electric blankets for up to $500, with added comforts like a wool-pile cover (which can be used as underlay in the summer), dual LCD controls and automatic temperature adjustment. ■

What to look for

BLANKET COVERAGE

- **Overheat protection** senses abnormal temperature variations and switches the blanket off if it gets too hot.
- A **fitted blanket** is easier to put on and take off and also keeps it flat and taut on the mattress.
- If your feet get particularly cold, look for a blanket with an **extra-warm foot zone**.
- Before you purchase an electric blanket, feel the **thickness** of the material. Ideally it will be thick enough so you can't feel the heating elements. A fleecy synthetic electric blanket is more comfortable to lie on.

EXTRA FEATURES

- **Dual controls** allow you to control the temperature on your side of the bed independently.
- **Programmable settings** let you pre-set a maximum heat setting at a particular time – say 10 minutes before you go to bed.
- **Waterproof electric blankets**, such as the Sunbeam Safe & Sound Waterproof ($139), are suitable for older children. Their waterproof membrane stops spills reaching the heating wires.
- **Removable controls** mean you can safely wash your blanket, if the manufacturer recommends it.

SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

Where there's electricity, there's potential danger. According to data from the NSW Fire Brigade, 20 household fires have been caused by electric blankets in NSW from 1st July 2008 to the time of writing. The NSW Fire Brigade recommends people test their electric blankets before using them. To test an electric blanket, lay it flat on top of the bed and switch it on for five minutes. Inspect and feel the wires: they should be undamaged and operating correctly. The following are other ways to use a blanket safely.

- Read the instructions and follow the manufacturer's recommendations for use and care.
- Some blankets can't be used on futons, rubber or foam mattresses, a water bed or under a mattress protector. Check this before you buy.
- Make sure your blanket isn't wider than the mattress.
- Turn the power off and remove the plug when the blanket is not in use.
- Do not leave electric blankets switched on all night.
- Don't switch the blanket on while it's folded or when there's something on the bed (such as books, clothing, a folded blanket, pillows or a pet). Any of these may lead to localised overheating.
- Place the blanket flat on the mattress with the switches at the pillow end, and secure it thoroughly.
- Keep the electric cord and switch outside the bed.
- Be careful with pointed or sharp objects that could damage the heating element.
- Don't use an electric blanket for an infant, an immobile person or someone insensitive to heat.
- Don't use an electric blanket with a hot water bottle (which may leak) or when it's wet.
- Have your blanket checked by a qualified professional every three years. Manufacturers usually recommend you take it to one of their service agents – check their web site.
- Don't wash an electric blanket unless the manufacturer specifically recommends it.
- If you want to take your blanket off the bed in summer, fold it neatly but not tightly, or roll it around a cylinder, and store it in a dry place.

If you're willing to pay a little more, an **illuminated LCD** screen makes it easy to see your settings in the dark. If you're likely to change your blanket's settings during the night, look for a control with raised markings (so you can identify the settings in the dark) and/or a light (which indicates that the blanket is switched on).

All juiced up

If you have a family to cater for, forget the juice bar – homemade could save you time and money.

nutshell

- On test: 17 juicers, including nine new models.
- Five models are non-centrifugal juicers.

Juice is a healthy alternative to coffee or soft drink. However, with juice's beneficial antioxidants and vitamins comes the inconvenience of cleaning your juicer. Most of the juicers on test have many parts, and aside from the base unit that generally only needs a wipe down, individual parts needs cleaning, preferably immediately after use so the juicer doesn't get sticky or stain. The table on page 54 identifies which parts of which juicers can be cleaned in a dishwasher, making this chore easier.

We tested both centrifugal and non-centrifugal juicers and separated them in the table. Centrifugal models are the most common, popular and affordable type of juicer. They use a rotating blade to cut fruit and vegetables, which is then pushed against a strainer at extreme speed. Non-centrifugal juicers can be a masticating (chewing) or cold-press style. See *CHOICE*, November 2007 (or www.choiceextra.com.au), for a description of these. Only two of the models on test included a citrus-juicing feature.

What to buy

Non-centrifugal juicers

80% Greenpower Hippocrates GPT-E1303

PRICE $749

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent score for orange, carrot and combined pineapple and watermelon juice.
- Motor warranty is 12 years and five years on parts and labour.
- Very good instructions with DVD.
- Can process wheatgrass, barley grass and alfalfa, and seeds such as sesame and pumpkin.
- Can be used as a food processor, to make soy milk and tofu, frozen dessert and baby food, and as a pepper and coffee grinder. Claims to be able to mince.
- Comes with optional attachable pasta and noodle maker at extra cost.
- Quiet.

BAD POINTS

- No cord storage.
- Hard vegetables take more time and effort to process.
- Some cracks and crevices trap dirt.

80% Healthstart Compact Multipurpose Juicer and Mincer

PRICE $269

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent score for carrot, orange, apple and combination pineapple and watermelon juice.
- Lifetime warranty on motor, five years on parts and labour.
- Easy to clean unit and parts.
- Very good instructions.
- Froth separator.
- Claims to mince, make ice-cream, noodles and pasta, and grind coffee beans.

BAD POINTS

- No dishwasher-safe parts.
- Fruit and vegetables need to be cut into small pieces.
- No cord storage.
- Control positioned at back of unit.
- Fruit/vegetables can become jammed inside chute and can be difficult to remove.
- No interlocking safety system.

80% Oscar Pro DA-930

PRICE $795

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent score for orange, apple, and combination pineapple and watermelon juice.

BAD POINTS

- Most expensive non-centrifugal juicer.
- Not dishwasher-safe.
- Fruit and vegetables need to be cut into small pieces.
- Very basic instructions.
- No cord storage.

Juicer or juice bar?

It's hard to ignore the proliferation of juice bars over the past few years, and the convenience of buying pre-made juices without having to clean up afterwards is appealing. However, how does the cost of buying juice compare with making your own?

For testing purposes, CHOICE used a kilogram of carrots to get an average 400mL-500mL of juice, and carrots range between $2 and $5 per kilo. We surveyed nine juice bars around Sydney and found the average cost of a medium-sized carrot juice (about 400g, but they sometimes include ice) ranges from $3.95 to $5.20 per glass. So, if you buy juice for yourself only, supporting your local juice bar is more cost-effective and convenient than making it yourself. However, if you have a large family and buy in bulk, a juicer at home may well be the way to go. >

VITAMINS AND MINERALS

Fresh juice is a great source of vitamins, but oxidation causes some vitamins to degrade as soon as they are exposed to oxygen. We found juice made in the Greenpower Hippocrates had more beta-carotene compared with juice made in the other juicers. However, the analysis of the nutritional values of calcium, potassium and vitamin C were small compared with the recommended daily intake (RDI). However, this may not be due to the juicers but the time between juicing and testing the juice sample.

Apart from losing vitamins, juice kept for any length of time looks unsightly and changes its flavour. We put a sample of apple juice from each juicer in a fridge and after 48 hours most had oxidised and separated into distinct layers of froth at the top, clear brown juice in the middle and sediment at the bottom. In our last test (*CHOICE*, November 2007), all juices from the non-centrifugal juicers had less separation than the centrifugal ones, results which carried through to most models in this test; however, the centrifugal Magimix also had less separation in this test than the other centrifugal juicers.

What to buy

Centrifugal juicers

83% Breville Ikon Juice Fountain BJE510 (A)

PRICE $270

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent score for carrot and combined pineapple and watermelon juice.
- Very good score for orange juice and apple juice.
- Very clear controls.
- Large juice jug and pulp container.
- Very good instructions.
- Parts are dishwasher-safe.

BAD POINTS
- Large and bulky; can be difficult to clean in a domestic sink.
- Blade assembly is accessible.

82% Breville BJE820 Professional 800 Collection

PRICE $450

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent score for carrot, orange and combination pineapple and watermelon juice.
- Very good instructions.
- Some parts are dishwasher-safe.
- Froth separator.
- Cord storage.
- Five-year motor warranty.
- Overload protection button.

BAD POINTS
- Large and bulky; can be difficult to clean in a domestic sink.
- Blade assembly accessible.
- Relatively noisy.

82% Breville BJE200 Juice Fountain

PRICE $170

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent score for apple and combination pineapple and watermelon juice.
- Very good instructions.
- Some parts are dishwasher-safe.
- Froth separator.
- Cord storage.

BAD POINTS
- Large and bulky; can be difficult to clean in a domestic sink.
- Blade assembly accessible.

What to Buy is continued overleaf ▶

▼ Centrifugal juicers

81% Breville BJE410 Juice Fountain Plus

PRICE $229

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent score for orange and combination pineapple and watermelon juice.
- Very good instructions.
- Some parts are dishwasher-safe.
- Froth separator.
- Cord storage.
- Five-year motor warranty.

BAD POINTS
- Large and bulky; can be difficult to clean in a domestic sink.
- Blade assembly accessible.

81% Sunbeam JE6400S Fresh Start (A)

PRICE $179

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent score for combination pineapple and watermelon juice.
- All parts dishwasher safe.
- Very good instructions.
- Froth separator.
- Cord storage.
- Five-year motor warranty.

BAD POINTS
- Large and bulky; can be difficult to clean in a domestic sink.
- Blade assembly accessible.
- Can be slightly unstable on bench when starting motor.

80% Sunbeam Café Juicer Whole Fruit Juice Extractor JE7600

PRICE $219

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent score for combined pineapple and watermelon juice.
- All parts are dishwasher-safe.

BAD POINTS
- Large and bulky; can be difficult to clean in a domestic sink.
- Blade assembly accessible.

80% Sunbeam Café Series Juice Extractor JE8900

PRICE $299

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent score for combination pineapple and watermelon juice.
- All parts are dishwasher-safe.

BAD POINTS
- Large and bulky; can be difficult to clean in a domestic sink.
- Blade assembly accessible.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			FEATURES	
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Overall score (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Pulp container	Dishwasher safe
CENTRIFUGAL JUICERS					
Breville Ikon Juice Fountain BJE510 (A)	83	85	80	Outside	✓ (I
# Breville BJE820 Professional 800 Collection	82	88	76	Outside	✓ (I
# Breville BJE200 Juice Fountain	82	86	78	Inside	✓ (E
# Breville BJE410 Juice Fountain Plus	81	85	76	Outside	✓ (I
# Sunbeam JE6400S Fresh Start (A)	81	83	78	Outside	✓ (E
Sunbeam Café Juicer Whole Fruit Juice Extractor JE7600	80	83	76	Outside	✓ (E
Sunbeam Café Series Juice Extractor JE8900	80	83	76	Outside	✓ (E
Kambrook Twin Speed Juicer KJE40 (A)	75	80	70	Outside	✓ (E
# Magimix Le Duo Plus XL	73	80	66	Inside	✓ (F
# Breville Vegetable and Citrus Duo JE3	72	75	68	Inside	✓ (C
# Sunbeam JE4700 Pure Juice	62	71	52	Outside	ns
NON-CENTRIFUGAL JUICERS					
Greenpower Hippocrates GPT-E1303	80	90	70	Outside	
# Healthstart Compact Multipurpose Juicer and Mincer	80	95	64	Outside	
# Oscar Pro DA-930	80	94	66	Outside	
Oscar 900 VitalMAX Chrome Juicer	78	90	66	Outside	
Champion 2000+ Juicer	74	85	62	na	

About the rest

- Both the Magimix and Breville Vegetable and Citrus Duo JE3 come with a citrus juicer attachment, so oranges only need to be halved for juicing as per manual citrus juicers – the Magimix citrus juicer, however, is not easy to use.
- The Sunbeam JE4700 Pure Juice has a good performance score but is messy and difficult to use.
- The Kambrook and Oscar 900 VitalMAX Chrome Juicer both have a small juice jug and pulp container, while the Oscar also has a narrow chute.
- The Champion has a narrow chute and no dishwasher-safe parts.

HOW WE TEST

Performance Our tester processes a kilogram each of carrots, apples, oranges and a combination of watermelon and pineapple. From these, she evaluates yield and each juicer's abilities across a range of textures and consistencies. She looks for juice that is smooth rather than pulpy, grainy or frothy.

Ease of use includes how easy it is to "feed" the juicer (which is affected by the size of the chute and how small the fruit and veg need to be chopped before they fit), assembly and disassembly of parts, cleaning, use of controls, collecting juice, and removing pulp.

Safety Each juicer is also assessed to see how easy it is for hands of various sizes to come into contact with the blades through the food chute when fully assembled. Safety isn't scored, but comments are included in the profiles.

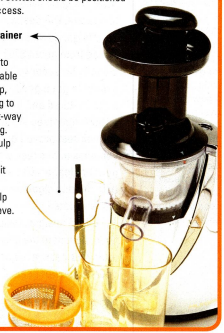
		SPECIFICATIONS						
Pure capability	Citrus juicer	Chute size*	Weight (kg)**	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)***	Juice jug capacity (mL)	Contact	Price ($)
		Excellent	5.1	44 x 35 x 20	1200	www.breville.com.au	270
✓		Excellent	6.6	43 x 21 x 35	1200	www.breville.com.au	450
		Excellent	3.7	41 x 25 x 23	800	www.breville.com.au	170
		Excellent	4.3	44 x 20 x 32	1000	www.breville.com.au	229
		Excellent	4.8	41 x 22 x 32	1000	www.sunbeam.com.au	179
		Excellent	5.3	41 x 32 x 22	1000	www.sunbeam.com.au	219
		Excellent	5.7	41 x 32 x 22	1000	www.sunbeam.com.au	299
		Excellent	3.7	38 x 30 x 22	700	www.kambrook.com.au	100
✓	✓	Good	6.9	42 x 22 x 22	na	www.cambur.com.au	575
	✓	Narrow	2.0	30 x 23 x 22	600	www.breville.com.au	100
		Narrow	2.2	29 x 26 x 17	365	www.sunbeam.com.au	60
✓		Narrow	6.5	32 x 20 x 39	900	www.vitality4life.com.au	749
✓		Narrow	4.0	38 x 17 x 36	1000	www.tohealth.com.au	269
		Narrow	6.3	44 x 26 x 17	1000	www.vitality4life.com.au	795
		Narrow	6.1	22 x 18 x 26	800	www.vitality4life.com.au	545
✓		Narrow	9.7	30 x 20 x 49	na	www.vitality4life.com.au	590

What to look for

JUICER ESSENTIALS

- A juicer should have as **few parts** as possible.
- The component parts should be **easy to fit together and separate**, with minimal dexterity required.
- It should be as **light** and **compact** as possible, taking up a small footprint on the kitchen bench and easily moved to a cupboard when not in use.
- Each part should be **easy to clean**, with very few cracks or crevices for juice or pulp to become trapped.
- It should come with a **large chute**, so fruit and vegetables don't need to be cut too small. An excellent chute size is one that can accommodate an average-size green apple.
- The **control switch** should be positioned for easy access.

The **pulp container** should be a practical size to hold a reasonable amount of pulp, without having to remove it part-way through juicing. An external pulp container is preferable as it reduces any build-up of pulp around the sieve.



USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Performance: 50%
- Ease of use: 50%

Price Recommended retail, as of April 2009.

TABLE NOTES

 # Newly tested models.
** Capacity to fit a whole apple.*
*** Including pulp container.*
**** Excluding juice jug.*
na Not applicable.
ns Not stated.
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores.
(B) All parts top shelf only.
(C) All parts except purée insert.
(D) All parts except juice cover.
(E) Pulp container, juice jug top shelf only.
(F) All parts dishwasher-safe, but select the minimum temperature and avoid the drying cycle. Top shelf is best.
(G) Filter basket is not dishwasher-safe.
(H) On/reverse.

BEST VALUE BEST VALUE BEST VALUE BEST VALUE BEST VALUE

choice shopper

To get the best deal on a juicer, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 655, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number. The full selection of models in this test may not be available in all states.

Beware pet hair

Most mid-priced vacuums are efficient and easy to use – but your four-legged friends could test their limits.

nutshell

- Most vacuum cleaners in the mid-price range perform well for general dirt pickup. However, a power head is recommended for picking up pet hair.
- Most of the models on test are very easy to use, with a good selection of additional tools.

CHOICE testing shows mid-range vacuum cleaners are good value for picking up dirt as well as easy to operate. But dealing with pet hair is another issue.

We got down and dirty with 16 of the latest vacuums priced from about $300 up to $680, including models that claim to be super quiet. At this price point, you should expect to get a good selection of onboard tools and some extra features and functions, such as variable power and a HEPA filter (see What to Look For, page 59). But our pet hair test proved quite challenging for most mid-price vacuums in this test, with the best-performing model, an upright cleaner with a power head incorporated into the unit, scoring significantly better than all but one of the models tested.

Barrel designs, which usually don't come with a power head, dominate the mid-price market. So if cleaning up after your pet is a major concern, you should factor the cost of a power head, if available, into your purchase.

Bag or bin – it's up to you

While vacuum cleaners that use a bag to capture and hold dirt are losing market share to bin models, several manufacturers continue to highlight the virtues of the bag when it comes to performance and ease of dirt disposal. More than half the vacuums on test use bags, including three models in our What to Buy list (opposite), but it's worth bearing in mind that all of our top three performers overall use a bin.

We have found no proof to support an argument that either bags or bins are consistently more effective than the other for either dirt pickup or overall performance, which makes the decision a matter of personal preference.

However, if you put environmental concerns high on your purchasing criteria, then bin-style vacuums have the benefit of not requiring bags that sometimes contain plastic or metal that may end up in landfill. >

What to buy

81% Bissell Healthy Home 6100-F

PRICE $499

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Excellent for removing pet hair.
- On-board storage for all tools.
- Excellent reach from the power point.

BAD POINTS

- Tiring to move the cleaning head over the carpet.
- Scratches polished board slightly.
- Cleaning head is too high to reach under low furniture easily, and the handle cannot be pushed down to ground level.
- Very heavy.
- Noisiest model on test, combined with slight high-pitched noise.

77% Electrolux Cyclone XL Bagless ZCX6412

PRICE $299

GOOD POINTS

- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Excellent for removing pet hair.
- On-board storage for all tools.
- Variable power.
- Very easy to move the cleaning head over the carpet.
- Easy to empty bin.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Controls are fiddly to use.
- Hose feels flimsy and crimps easily.

What to buy

76% Dyson DC19

PRICE $649

GOOD POINTS
- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Very good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- On-board storage for all tools.
- Excellent at cleaning under low furniture due to the thin-edged cleaning head.
- Easy to empty bin.

BAD POINTS
- Borderline for removing pet hair.
- High-pitched noise can be irritating.

74% Hoover Freemotion Pureair TFB2223013

PRICE $449

GOOD POINTS
- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Excellent at cleaning corners and along edges.
- On-board storage for all tools.
- Variable power.
- Excellent controls located within fingertip reach.

BAD POINTS
- Borderline for removing pet hair.
- High-pitched noise can be irritating.

74% Samsung Twin Chamber System SC6591

PRICE $299

GOOD POINTS
- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- On-board storage for all tools.
- Variable power.
- Lightweight.
- Easy to empty bin.
- Excellent controls located at the fingertip.

BAD POINTS
- Borderline for removing pet hair.
- High-pitched noise can be irritating.

73% Electrolux Ultra Silencer ZUS3386

PRICE $450

GOOD POINTS
- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Variable power.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Very easy to move the cleaning head over the carpet.
- Comparatively quiet.

BAD POINTS
- Borderline for removing pet hair.
- Hose feels flimsy and crimps easily.

72% Nilfisk Power Allergy P40

PRICE $449

GOOD POINTS
- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- On-board storage for all tools.
- Variable power.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Comparatively quiet.

BAD POINTS
- Borderline for removing pet hair.

If cleaning up after your pet is a major concern, you should factor the cost of a power head into the purchase.

About the rest

- Electroluxs claims its Green Ultra Silencer ZUSG3000 is not only environmentally friendly but also very quiet, and at only 63dB we agree. It performs well when removing normal dirt and has excellent reach. However, it doesn't perform as well as our recommended models when attempting to pick up pet hair from carpet.
- The Miele S2120 and S5311 are both very good at picking up dirt and easy to use but don't score as well as our top performers for picking up pet hair. The Duoflex 4000 is the worst of the Miele models for picking up pet hair but is very easy to use.
- The Samsung Multichamber System SC9180 is among the quietest on test and very easy to use, but not very effective at picking up pet hair.
- Both Vax models are very easy to use and the VZ-704 is very good at cleaning hard-to-reach places, however both perform poorly when picking up pet hair and the VZ-302 is one of the noisier models on test.
- The Sebo is very easy to use and versatile when cleaning the corners and edges of a room, however it delivers only OK dirt removal performance.
- The Numatic shows a lot of personality – including even a cute cartoon face on the front of its barrel – is good at picking up dirt from carpet and is quiet to operate. However, it is not easy to use or very effective at picking up pet hair.

One environmental plus of bin-style vacuums is that they don't require bags that sometimes contain plastic or metal that may end up in landfill.

HOW WE TEST

Dirt removal from carpet To test the dirt removal from carpet we pre-load the vacuum cleaners with artificial household dust. We embed sand evenly into a section of carpet and vacuum it to a set pattern and speed. The sand collected is then weighed and recorded as a percentage of the sand applied; this is done twice for each model and the results averaged. We rate all models based on the dirt pickup performance from carpet using the standard cleaning head.

Ease of use This is based on how easy it is to manoeuvre the cleaner and move the cleaning head on the carpet and under low furniture; how difficult it is to empty and change the dirt receptacle; the operation of the controls; and how easy the supplied accessories are to use and store.

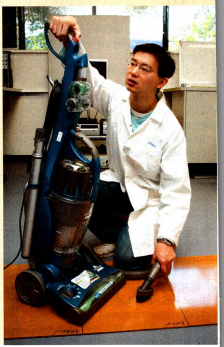
Cleaning corners and edges Sand is spread into a right-angled corner and vacuumed to see how close to the corner each cleaner is able to pick up dirt using the standard cleaning head.

Pet hair removal We embed cat hair into the carpet and vacuum it to a set pattern and speed in exactly the same way as the dirt pickup test. We rate the results based on how much cat hair is left behind after the test. Where supplied, we use a turbo brush or a power head; otherwise we use the standard cleaning head.

Scratch test We set the cleaning head to the hard-floor setting and use the hard-floor tool or standard cleaning head set to hard-floor setting. We run the head back and forth over a lacquered fibre board 50 times and check for scratch marks.

For uprights, the brush is stopped from rotating where possible.

Noise is measured at the user's position at maximum setting. Some models emit a high-pitched whistle that can be irritating, even though they may not be louder than others.



PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						FEATURES				
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Dirt removal from carpet score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Cleaning corners and edges score (%)	Pet hair removal score (%)	Noise (dB)	Power head / Turbo brush	Crevice / upholstery tool/ dusting brush	On-board storage	Variable suction control	Variable power
Bissell Healthy Home 6100-F	81	92	60	75	100	76	√ (A) / -	√ / √ / √	√		
Electrolux Cyclone XL Bagless ZCX6412	77	73	83	64	90	69	- / √	√ / √ / -	√	√	√
Dyson DC19	76	78	84	82	50	71	- / -	√ / √ / √	√		
Hoover Freemotion Pureair TFB2223013	74	70	83	92	50	66	- / -	√ / √ / √	√	√	√
Samsung Twin Chamber System SC6591	74	74	87	70	50	69	- / √	√ / √ / √	√	√	√
Electrolux Ultra Silencer ZUS3386	73	73	87	71	50	63	- / -	√ / √ / √	√ (B)	√	√
Nilfisk Power Allergy P40	72	74	80	72	50	63	- / √	√ / √ / √	√	√	√
Electrolux Green Ultra Silencer ZUSG3000	71	77	87	64	30	63	- / -	√ / √ / √	√ (B)	√	√
Miele S2120	71	83	75	71	30	67	- / -	√ / √ / √	√	√	√
Miele S5311	70	82	70	75	30	67	- / -	√ / √ / √	√	√	√
Miele Duoflex 4000 S4212	68	80	81	70	10	67	- / -	√ / √ / √	√	√	√
Samsung Multi Chamber System SC9180	68	76	84	70	10	63	- / √	√ / √ / √	√	√	√
Vax Zero Infinity VZ-704	67	65	89	85	10	68	- / √	√ / √ / √	√	√	
Sebo Airbelt K3 Vulcano	66	66	86	81	10	65	- / -	√ / √ / √	√	√	√
Vax Zero Advance VZ-302	64	65	88	65	10	72	- / -	√ / √ / √	√ (B)	√	
Numatic Henry HVR 200-22	60	73	66	65	10	65	- / -	√ / √ / √	√ (B)	√	√

What to look for

THE NITTY-GRITTY ON VACUUM CLEANERS

- If you can try out a vacuum cleaner in the shop, look for one that's **light**, **quiet** and **easy to manoeuvre** over both carpet and hard surfaces. A **long cord**, so you're not changing power points, as well as a neat, compact design for easy storage are also desirable.
- A **turbo head** has a rotating brush driven by airflow, and a **power head** uses an inbuilt motor. While both are supposed to enhance cleaning performance, our testing has shown the power head to be more effective, particularly when picking up pet hair. However, these heads are usually larger and bulkier than a standard cleaning head and usually only included as a standard item on expensive vacuum cleaners.
- **Adjustable head height** allows you to adjust the height of the bristles on the cleaning head to the length of the carpet pile or for when you're vacuuming hard surfaces.
- **Variable power/suction** This allows you to lower the suction for delicate jobs, such as cleaning curtains.
- A **telescopic wand** lets you adjust the wand to suit your height, so you don't have to bend too much.
- **HEPA filter** This stands for high-efficiency particulate air filter – an international standard for filters that trap particles – which can help if you have asthma, a dust allergy or are sensitive to dust.
- **Dust collector** The vacuum cleaners in this test have either a **bin** or **bag** and none are difficult to empty. The advantage of a bin over a bag is that it has no ongoing costs.
- **Fashion colours** are rapidly being adopted by manufacturers, so consider how long you can live with a colour before selecting it.

Tools The standard tools to check for are **dusting**, **crevice** and **upholstery brushes**, and having onboard storage for all makes it easier to find them when you need them.

CIFICATIONS

	Power, measured at maximum speed (W)	Dust collector	Dirt receptacle volume (L)	Cost per bag ($)*	Reach (m)	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price ($)
ght	1380	Bin	1.6	na	11.2	11.9	www.bissell.com.au	499
el	1290	Bin	2.9	na	8.8	7.0	www.electrolux.com.au	299
el	1260	Bin	1.3	na	9.2	8.0	www.dyson.com.au	649
el	1800	Bag	2.6	3.70	9.0	8.5	www.hooverfloorcare.com.au	449
el	1660	Bin	1.5	na	8.8	6.9	www.samsung.com.au	299
el	1300	Bag	1.8	3.00	12.0	7.8	www.electrolux.com.au	450
el	1400	Bag	1.9	3.60	10.2	8.9	www.nilfisk-advance.com.au	449
el	1100	Bag	1.8	3.00	12.0	7.4	www.electrolux.com.au	450
el	1400	Bag	2.4	5.00	8.2	5.8	www.miele.com.au	296
el	1710	Bag	3.0	5.00	10.6	8.2	www.miele.com.au	529
el	1720	Bag	1.7	5.00	8.6	6.6	www.miele.com.au	429
el	1660	Bin	1.2	na	9.8	8.7	www.samsung.com.au	599
el	1390	Bin	1.3	na	8.4	7.7	www.vax.com.au	399
el	1640	Bag	1.7	3.80	8.8	8.2	www.sebo.com.au	680
el	1220	Bin	1.5	na	9.0	7.4	www.vax.com.au	299
ster	1050	Bag	5.0	3.20	13.0	8.7	www.intervac.net.au	535

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Dirt removal from carpet: 40%
- Ease of use: 30%
- Corners and edges cleaning: 15%
- Pet hair removal: 15%

All models scored 100% in the scratch test except the Bissell, which scratched our test board slightly and achieved a score of 50%. Pet hair for testing supplied by Woof Cat & Dog Grooming, Bondi.

Noise For comparison, a typical conversation is carried out at about 60dB, while city traffic is measured at 80dB.

Features See What to Look For, above.

Measured power Higher power doesn't guarantee better cleaning performance, as the table shows.

Price Recommended retail, as of April 2009.

TABLE NOTES

** Bags usually available in packs of four, five or more.*
na Not applicable.
(A) Upright model has a power head incorporated into unit.
(B) Cannot hold all tools onboard.

BEST VALUE BEST VALUE BEST VALUE BEST VALUE BEST VALUE
choice shopper

To get the best deal on a vacuum cleaner, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 855, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number. The full selection of models in this test may not be available in all states.

Biking with kids

CHOICE tests seven child seats and four trailers so you can choose the best one for taking your toddler for a ride.

nutshell

- Seats are cheaper, smaller and easier to store than trailers, but don't shelter your child as well – and can make your bike less balanced.
- Pay extra attention to safety when riding with a child in a seat or trailer.

Going for a bike ride with your child is a great way to spend time together; it's an adventure, you get some exercise and both of you enjoy fresh air and sunshine. Until your child is old enough to ride his or her own bicycle, you'll need to carry them on yours, either in a child seat or in a trailer towed behind. But with so many child seats and trailers of different designs and prices on the market, which is the right one for you and your child?

CHOICE put seven seats and four trailers to the test to find which are safest and easiest to use. We assessed the child seats against the voluntary standard for child carrier seats for pedal bicycles, AS/NZS 4287:1995. Unfortunately, this standard hasn't been reviewed since 1995, and while still useful, it's behind the times in some respects – for example, it only covers rear-mounted seats. Several of the seats in this test don't meet the standard, suggesting industry isn't paying much attention to it anymore.

One of the most important safety considerations for a child seat or trailer is its harness. Because your child will be moving at speed and sitting relatively high off the ground if they're in a bike-mounted seat, they must be securely strapped in. So, while we used the child carrier seat standard as a basis for testing, we also assessed the trailer and seat harnesses against the most up-to-date and rigorous requirements available: the harness clauses from the Australian stroller standard AS/NZS 2088:2000. This standard calls for harnesses to be five-point (with shoulder, waist and crotch straps), which is the most secure type.

There are centre- and front-mounted child seats now on the market, and we think the standard should cover these as well as rear-mounted seats. As more and more people are now cycling, we also believe it's time AS/NZS 4287 was updated to be more relevant for today's cycling parents and manufacturers.

Which type is for you?

Seats and trailers each have their pros and cons. Here are the key points to consider when deciding which is best for you.

Seats are less expensive, smaller and easier to store than trailers. Your child sits close to you so conversation is easier, and there is no need to bend down while loading or unloading the seat, but you need to stabilise the bike. However, a seat can make the bike less balanced as it raises the centre of gravity, and your child isn't sheltered from the weather.

Trailers are stable while loading, can carry other cargo such as shopping bags and offer more shelter than seats. However, they can be expensive and are heavy and bulky compared with child seats, although they can be folded for storage. As your child sits further away from you, conversation is harder. Trailers also increase the effective length and width of the bike.

Is your child ready to ride?

Whether you use a child seat or trailer, your child must be strong enough to support his or her own head while sitting upright. By law, children must wear a helmet, even in an enclosed trailer, so make sure they can bear that extra weight too. They'll also need to be able to cope with the bumps and bounces experienced when riding, and with acceleration forces as you speed up or slow down. Most children are ready at about a year old. If you're not sure, get advice from your child's doctor.

Once your child is too big and heavy to fit into a child seat or trailer – typically from about four years of age – you can consider a tag-along style of trailer, which is like a partial bike with seat and handlebars and a rear wheel. Or, of course, you can start them on their own bike, with training wheels if necessary.

Riding with children

When riding with a child in a seat or trailer attached to your bike, pay extra attention to safety. If you aren't already a reasonably experienced cyclist, get some practice before you start riding with your child. Confidence, skill and fitness will make you a much safer rider with baby on board. If possible, try riding with the seat or trailer empty or with a dummy load, to get used to the bike's changed handling characteristics.

Avoid riding in traffic – stick to cycle paths in well-lit areas. Remember, you and your child must wear helmets; don't ride at night or in low visibility conditions such as rain or fog. >

What to buy

The Weeride, Chariot and Croozer have the safest harnesses; the Rosebank passes the child seat standard.

Child seats

77% Weeride Kangaroo Baby Carrier

PRICE $170

GOOD POINTS

- Child is within view of the adult rider at all times.
- Very easy to mount bike with the seat in place.
- No assembly required for the seat.
- Very easy to connect and disconnect seat to bike.
- Harness meets stroller standard requirements.

BAD POINTS

- Doesn't comply with Australian standard for child seats for bicycles, due to centre mounting, method of attaching to bike and seat dimensions.
- Small seat.
- Seat is secured to mounting frame by only one screw.

66% Rosebank Deluxe Child Safety Seat HS2002

PRICE $120

GOOD POINTS

- Can accommodate a larger child.
- Rigid cross bar.
- Secure four-point bike attachment.
- Has a waist strap.
- The only seat on test that meets all key requirements of the standard for child carrier seats.

BAD POINTS

- May be difficult to mount bike with seat in place.
- Harness is awkward to use and is not compliant with the stroller standard (the crotch strap connection is too far from the backrest).

Trailers

85% Chariot Cougar 2

PRICE $1530

GOOD POINTS

- Five-point harness that meets stroller standard.
- Can carry two children.
- Very easy to mount bike with the trailer in place.
- Excellent bike handling.
- Very easy to load and unload children.
- Can convert to a stroller, and other conversion kits are also available.
- Certified to the American standard for bicycle trailers ASTM F1975-02 (we didn't test this).

BAD POINTS

- Very expensive.

83% Croozer 535

PRICE $799

GOOD POINTS

- Five-point harness that meets stroller standard.
- Can carry two children.
- Very easy to mount bike with trailer in place.
- Excellent bike handling.
- Can convert to a stroller.

BAD POINTS

- Too wide to fit through an average doorway.
- Second-most expensive seat or trailer on test.

About the rest

CHILD SEATS

- The other child seats are worth considering, but have some drawbacks compared with the recommended models. None of their harnesses meets the stroller standard requirements, and none meets all the key requirements of the Australian standard for child seats for bicycles. The Cyclops distributor disagreed with our assessment, stating it has certification for its seat against AS/NZS 4287:1995.

TRAILERS

- The Pacific and Cyclops trailers are worth considering if you're on a budget, as they're significantly cheaper than the recommended models. Both perform well, and the Pacific is easy to use; the Cyclops a little less so, as its safety strap is difficult to undo and the harness can be awkward to use. However, as their harnesses don't meet the full stroller standard requirements, we don't think they're as safe as the Chariot and Croozer trailers. The Cyclops distributor disagreed with our test method, stating its trailer is certified as meeting the US standard ASTM F1975 – 2002.

UNTESTED BRANDS

We weren't able to buy or test all the brands and models on the market. However, the Burley Solo single seat trailer was recently tested and recommended by Bicycle Victoria, which also recommends Hamax and Bobike child seats. Go to www.bv.com.au and search for "kiddie carriers" for more information, including advice on choosing and using child seats and trailers.

There are some innovative alternatives to child seats and trailers. The Taga is a Dutch multifunctional urban vehicle that converts in seconds from stroller to three-wheeled bike with built-in child seat (it's not yet available here, but retails overseas for about $3500). Cargo cycles, such as the Christiana tricycle, are another European design, having a wooden cargo box built into the frame which is big enough to carry a child or a large load of groceries; these are available in Australia.

< Be especially careful when cornering. The weight of the child in the seat could make the bike unbalanced, and a trailer could tip if you take a tight corner too fast. Allow greater time and distance for braking. Allow extra time for crossing roads and other danger points, especially with the extra length of a trailer.

With a child seat attached, your bike's centre of gravity and handling will change. Keep hold of your bike whenever a child is in the seat. A child in a rear-mounted seat may be able to access your saddle springs, so cover these to prevent little fingers getting caught. If you're wearing a backpack, make sure it can't hit a child seated behind you. ■

USING THE TABLE

Overall score This is made up of:
- Performance: 50%
- Ease of use: 50%

Performance score This is made up of:
- Riding / starting / stopping on level ground: 40%
- Rider mounting / dismounting the bike: 20%
- Riding / starting / stopping going uphill: 10%
- Riding / starting / stopping going downhill: 10%
- Manoeuvrability: 10%
- Off-road handling: 10%

Ease of use score This is made up of:
- Loading / unloading a child into the seat or trailer: 50%
- Connecting / disconnecting the seat or trailer to the fitting: 30%
- Assembly: 10%
- Installing the bike fitting: 10%

Price Recommended or average retail, as of May 2009.

HOW WE TEST

Safety – child seats Our tester assesses the child seats against key clauses from the Australian standard for child carrier seats for pedal bicycles, AS/NZS 4287:1995, including dimensions, labels and instructions, construction and preventing access to the bike's wheels. As this standard is quite old, he also assesses the harnesses against mandatory requirements from the more up-to-date stroller standard, AS/NZS 2088:2000.

Safety – trailers As there is no Australian standard for bicycle trailers, he assesses the trailers against relevant clauses from the stroller standard, looking at the harnesses and folding mechanism and checking for any finger traps and sharp edges.

Performance The seats and trailers are attached to a bicycle as per their instructions, a dummy child is strapped in and an experienced cyclist then rides the bike around a fixed course. The rider assesses the bike's handling while starting, riding and stopping on a level path and up and down hills, and also manoeuvrability and off-road handling (bumpy terrain). Mounting and dismounting the bike with the seat or trailer attached is also assessed; in the case of the seats, this is assessed by both a male and female rider, as males and females often mount bikes differently.

Ease of use Our tester assesses ease of assembly, installing the bike fitting (the rack or mounting to which the seat or trailer connects), connecting and disconnecting the seat or trailer to the fitting, and loading and unloading a child.

TABLE NOTES

** Maximum dimensions when in use, rounded up to the next cm.*
(A) Harness is not compliant with stroller standard, but the seat meets all key requirements of the standard for child carrier seats.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE				FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS			
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Harness compliant with stroller standard	Type	Number of children	Maximum load (kg)	Weight (kg)	Dimensions (cm. H x W x D)*	Contact	Price ($)
CHILD SEATS											
Weeride Kangaroo Baby Carrier	77	81	73	√	Centre mount	1	18	2.7	43 x 26 x 44	www.weeride.com.au	170
Repco Child Safety Seat R92600	69	69	69		Rear mount	1	18	3.5	96 x 40 x 42	www.pacbrands.com.au	118
OKBaby Ergon	67	65	68		Rear mount	1	22	3.5	75 x 43 x 60	www.apollobikes.com	199
Topeak Baby Seat – caliper brake	67	70	64		Rear mount	1	18	4.2	102 x 41 x 48	www.cassons.com.au	220
Rosebank Deluxe Child Safety Seat HS2002	66	74	58	(A)	Rear mount	1	22	3.4	97 x 40 x 43	www.rosebankhelmets.com.au	120
Cyclops 170/10250	64	65	62		Rear mount	1	22	1.9	72 x 33 x 57	www.hunterleisure.com.au	70
Beto BSC001DB	57	61	53		Rear mount	1	18	3.2	95 x 35 x 38	www.bicorp.com.au	179
TRAILERS											
Chariot Cougar 2	85	91	79	√	Axle mounted	2	45	12.6	86 x 82 x 142	www.morristanley.com	1530
Croozer 535	83	91	74	√	Axle mounted	2	45	14.9	84 x 88 x 149	www.croozer.com.au	799
Pacific Steel Kiddie Trailer PSKT	80	81	79		Axle mounted	2	36	14.5	84 x 97 x 135	03 5248 2208	400
Cyclops Master Cycle Explorer	79	90	67		Axle mounted	2	45	9.4	75 x 78 x 135	www.hunterleisure.com.au	140

What to look for

THE BASICS

- **Comfortable fit** Take your toddler to the bike shop and put him or her in the trailers and seats mounted on bikes to be sure they fit safely and comfortably. Check the dimensions and weight rating suit your child both now and into the future as your child grows. If you're choosing a trailer, check your child is fully contained within the frame (roll-cage), even when sitting upright and wearing a helmet.
- **Loading and unloading** It should be easy to load your child into the seat or trailer. Remember you'll have to stabilise the bike while putting your child into a child seat and you'll probably need both hands to manage your child. Trailers are more stable but you need to bend down.

CHILD SEATS

- **Type** Rear-mounted seats are still the most common, and can often take a larger, heavier child as they're mounted on a well-braced rack over the rear wheel. Centre- or front-mounted seats generally don't take as large a child, but have the advantage of keeping the child in your sight and easier to talk to while riding. Long-legged riders might find a centre-mounted seat gets in the way of their knees, requiring a more splayed pedalling action.
- **Installation** Check the seat fitting suits your bike. Most fittings suit most bikes, and some seats have different fitting options to suit different bikes – depending on whether the bike has disc or caliper brakes. If possible, ask the shop to fit the seat mounting, as we found this task difficult for several of the tested seats due to poor instructions and the need for tools, such as allen keys, which were not included.
- **Mounting and dismounting** Check you're comfortable getting on and off the bike with the seat attached. Rear-mounted seats in particular make it harder to swing your leg over the back wheel. A step-through ("women's") bike frame helps eliminate this problem.
- **Standard certification** While the standard AS/NZS 4287:1995 is not as up to date as we'd like, it's still worth looking for certification. The standard covers only rear-mounted seats.

TRAILERS

- **Installation and connection** Trailers generally connect to the bike via a quick-release mechanism that attaches to the bike's rear wheel hub. It generally won't matter whether the bike itself has a quick-release or nutted hub. We found these mechanisms easy to fit for the tested models. The trailer arm should have a back-up strap connecting it to the bike in case the main connection fails; all the models on test have one.
- **One or two seats** We tested two-seat models, but you might find a slightly smaller single-seat model better suits your needs. Two-seaters should ideally be easily adjustable to sit a single child in a central position.
- **Visibility aids** Trailers sit low to the ground, so a brightly coloured flag on a mast is a good feature to make the trailer more visible, particularly in traffic. Of the models on test, only the Pacific doesn't have one. All the trailers also have reflectors. However, even with these aids, avoid using the trailer at night or in low-visibility conditions such as rain.
- **Folding** Trailers are fairly bulky, so it's useful if the frames fold and the wheels are easily removed for easy storage or transporting in the car. All the models on test can be folded and their wheels easily removed.
- **Conversion kits** The Chariot and Croozer can be converted to jogger or four-wheel strollers. Hiking and skiing kits are also available for the Chariot. Conversion kits extend the useful life of the trailer. We didn't test these models in stroller configuration, but may include them in future stroller tests.
- **Standard certification** There's no Australian standard for bike trailers, but there is a US standard ASTM F1975. The Chariot and Cyclops are certified to this standard. Trailers that convert to strollers should meet the Australian stroller standard AS/NZS 2088:2000 when in stroller configuration.

AND ALSO ... HELMETS

- You and your child must wear **properly fitting helmets** when cycling. It's the law, and is a commonsense safety precaution. Your child must be able to comfortably support the weight of the helmet for the duration of the ride, so make sure it's not too heavy.
- Helmets sold in Australia must meet the **Australian Standard AS/NZS 2063** or US Snell Standard. All the major brands do, but check the packaging or labels to be sure.
- If you're using a trailer, make sure its **roof allows enough room** for your child to sit up straight while wearing a helmet, otherwise an uncomfortable stooped position can result.
- Go to a good bike shop and **try a few different helmets**. Get the shop's expert advice on fitting; the key points are that the helmet should sit level just above the eyebrows, with the chinstrap even on both sides and fitting snugly but not too tight. The helmet shouldn't wobble or move about once the chinstrap is done up; if it does, adjust the padding or straps, or try another model.
- **Don't buy a second-hand helmet** unless you're absolutely sure it's undamaged. Damage, such as cracked foam, is often not visible.
- If possible, give your child the **choice of helmets**; they'll be happier wearing a helmet if they choose it themselves.

Harness Look for models with a five-point harness. The straps should be adjustable (allowing for growth) and the buckles easy to use for you, but not your child.
Connection The seat should connect securely to its fitting and not wobble, but still be quick and easy to remove and attach.

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on 02 6243 1262.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

FOOD ■ Sunbeam Foods has recalled **Sunbeam Pistachios**, 80g pillow pack, with best-before dates of 22 SEP 09, 23 SEP 09 and 30 SEP 09, product number 9310162860079/19310162860076. They were sold in Franklins in NSW, IGA in NSW, Queensland and Victoria, Spar in Queensland, and Woolworths / Safeway in Victoria, SA and WA.
The problem The nuts may be contaminated with the *Salmonella* bacteria, which can cause symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal pain persisting for longer than 24 hours.
What to do Don't eat them. If you have any concerns about your health, you should seek medical advice from your GP. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1800 356 546.

FOOD ■ Glutenfree Bakery has recalled **Glutenfree Bakery Lamingtons**, 300g clear polypropylene bag, with use-by dates between 28 May 2009 and 03 Oct 2009. They were sold in IGA, independent supermarkets, delis, chemists/pharmacies and health food stores.
The problem They contain an undeclared allergen in egg.
What to do Don't eat them if you have an allergy or intolerance to egg. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD ■ Haigh's Manufacturing has recalled **Haigh's Chocolate and Almond Cookie**, 120g, best-before 4-AUG-09, and sold in Haigh's stores.
The problem It contains an undeclared allergen in gluten.
What to do Don't eat it if you have an allergy or intolerance to gluten. Return it to your nearest Haigh's store for a refund.

FOOD ■ Nut Producers Australia has recalled **Value Pack Dry Roasted and Salted Pistachios**, 500g plastic bag, best before 20 AUG 09 and sold in Coles stores in every state except WA.
The problem The nuts may be contaminated with the *Salmonella* bacteria, which can cause symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal pain persisting for longer than 24 hours.
What to do Don't eat them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

HIGH CHAIR ■ Roger Armstrong Nursery Furniture has recalled all **Evenflo Majestic High Chairs**, namely Evenflo Majestic High Chair and Majestic Discovery High Chair, model numbers 3001713A and 3002848A.
The problem The screw and pivot cap hardware on both sides of the high chair can release, posing a choking and fall hazard to young children.
What to do Contact Roger Armstrong Nursery Furniture on 1800 062 484, or email Service.ra@bigpond.com to arrange for delivery of a repair kit.

KIDS' JOURNAL ■ U Games Australia has recalled **Creativity for Kids Dream Journal**, sold since October 2008.
The problem The thread that lines the inside of the light-up pen included in the kit doesn't meet the Australian standard for lead levels in children's toys, posing a risk of lead poisoning.
What to do Remove the pen from the reach of children. Return it to U Games Australia Pty Ltd, Reply Paid 84588, Level 1, 71-73 Chandos St, St Leonards 2065. Include your name and address for a refund to be sent to you. For more information call 02 9436 1016, or email angela@ugames.com.au.

KIDS' WATCH ■ Pacific Magazines has recalled **Ben 10 Alien Fighter Watch**, which was provided as a free gift with the December 2008 issue of *KZone* magazine.
The problem It failed the NSW product safety standard test.
What to do Remove it from the reach of children.

Product Alert

SA Health has issued a public health warning advising South Australians not to eat semi-dried tomatoes that have been purchased loose and were available mainly at supermarket delicatessens or in food from cafes. Semi-dried tomatoes in oil, garlic and herbs supplied by Siena Foods should particularly be avoided. SA Health has linked the tomatoes with an increase in cases of Hepatitis A. Siena Foods is working with health authorities to voluntarily remove the product from retailers' shelves. As Siena Foods received this product from interstate companies, SA Health is working with Victorian and Queensland health authorities to identify the source of the contamination. If you've purchased semi-dried tomatoes that aren't pre-packaged, throw them away. The recall doesn't apply to tomatoes sold in jars, pre-packaged or vacuum-packed. If you've eaten semi-dried tomatoes recently and have concerns about your health, contact your GP.

BLENDER ■ GAF Control has recalled **You'll Love Coles 1.5L Stainless Steel Blender**, model YLC8, sold between 2008 and 2009 at Coles, BI-LO and Pick 'n' Pay stores; **Tiffany 1.5L Stainless Steel Blender**, model BLS1, sold between 2004 and 2009 at The Warehouse Group, Campbells Cash & Carry, Franklins, The Good Guys, Coles and various independent stores; and **Homemaker 1.5L Stainless Steel Blender**, model HMBLSK, sold between 2007 and 2008 at Kmart.
The problem The glass may break and cause injury.
What to do Stop using it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1300 659 489.

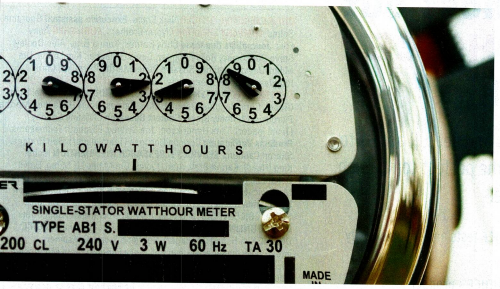
SAND ■ Talison Greenbushes has recalled **Spodgrit**, a coarse grey sand used mostly for subsoil drainage and some concrete, but which has been identified as being used as a water filter. The affected Spodgrit was supplied in WA by KD Powers & Co, Podmore Holdings Pty Ltd, Hesketh Contracting and Talison Greenbushes Pty Ltd.
The problem When used as a water filter, Spodgrit can leach arsenic above the maximum level recommended in human drinking water. Arsenic is a poison and carcinogen.
What to do If you are using Spodgrit from the above suppliers as a water filter, stop drinking the water and call 1800 55 24 74 between 8am and 6pm, Monday to Friday, to make arrangements for testing and free replacement of the Spodgrit.

EVAPORATIVE COOLER ■ Brivis Australia has recalled **Brivis AD Series Evaporative Cooler** and **Carrier 29CB Series Evaporative Cooler**, serial number range 403265-563076, sold between 28 August 2000 and 21 November 2003.
The problem The water circulating pump may fail, possibly resulting in property and/or personal injury.
What to do Stop operating the unit. Call 1800 043 214 or go to www.brivisadcoolerrework.com.au to make arrangements for free repairs to be carried out.

BICYCLE HANDLE POSTS ■ Netti Atom has recalled **Dahon Radius Bicycle Handle Posts** from the following bicycle models: 2008 Vitesse D7, Brick (red), identifier KA072; 2008 Boardwalk D7, Sage (green), identifier HC072; 2008 Mu XL Sport, Steel (grey), identifier PA084; and 2008 Mu XL, Gunmetal (grey), identifier PA084D. The affected posts were delivered to dealers between April 2008 and February 2009.
The problem The radius hinge may crack and break, posing a fall hazard to the rider.
What to do Stop using the bicycle until it's checked. Contact your local dealer for more information.

ROOF RACKS ■ Roof Rack Industries has recalled **Subaru SA 098 Roof Bars** and **ROLA Roof Bars**. The Subaru SA 098 Roof Bars were supplied to Subaru between November 2002 and May 2007, and the ROLA Roof Bars were supplied directly to customers between November 2002 and June 2006.
The problem The straps that anchor the roof bars to the vehicle may stretch or bend to the point where they detach from the roof.
What to do The straps can be returned to Roof Rack Industries and a replacement will be supplied free of charge. Go to www.roofrackguide.com.au for more information.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY



Save your energy

With electricity prices set to rise as much as 200% over the next five years, reducing household energy use through improved efficiency is the key to warding off massive bills.

Households can save up to 30% of their electricity bills by adopting energy-efficiency measures already available, according to the 2008 report, *Energy and Equity*, co-written by CHOICE, the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Australian Council of Social Service. While you're saving energy, money and the environment by turning off your lights and minimising home heating, we're working with industry and government to find solutions that make saving energy at home even easier.

With heating, cooling and hot water systems accounting for more than 70% of the average home's electricity use, the federal government's commitment to spend $4 billion on ceiling insulation and solar hot water systems is a step in the right direction. But we believe more is needed to adequately protect households against expected energy price rises.

This month, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) will finalise its long-awaited National Energy Efficiency Strategy. A key part of the strategy is improving energy efficiency in the home, focusing on building design and household products and appliances.

CHOICE is pleased the draft strategy improves household energy efficiency in seven critical areas.

Education campaigns on the most effective methods for achieving both energy and water efficiency.

Home audits of energy and water use that result in recommendations for behavioural change, physical improvements and referrals to sources of assistance.

Financial and other assistance for low-income households to implement measures that improve water and energy efficiency.

Improved labelling on products and appliances so that initial and subsequent purchasers can make informed decisions about energy efficiency at the point of purchase.

Financial and taxation incentives to encourage landlords to retrofit properties to improve energy and water efficiency.

Public housing Improving energy and water efficiency in public housing.

New buildings Mandatory energy efficiency standards in all new buildings.

To learn more about saving energy in your home, visit www.choice.com.au/green. ■

MPS CODE

Raising the tone

The mobile premium services industry has finally responded to CHOICE's calls for better consumer protection.

CHOICE and other consumer groups have long been fighting for improved consumer protection against mobile premium services (MPS). That's why we welcome the long-overdue MPS Code, and in particular its double opt-in requirement, which means prospective customers of the services – including ringtones, horoscopes, music videos, voting for reality shows, sports scores and various other novelties – will have to send two separate text messages to request subscription to premium SMS services. If a consumer subscribes to an MPS and later decides they don't want it, they can simply text the word "stop" to end the relevant service.

As well as the opt-in requirement, we're happy to see other key demands have been included in the new code. MPS advertising has been banned in media targeted at persons under 15, to help prevent them being signed up to the service. Consumers will also be able to bar MPS access on their phone – although disappointingly, this will only be available from July 2010.

The industry's response to problems around MPS has been too slow, reflecting the failure of the current process in which consumer protection codes are developed by the industry association under the Telecommunications Act.

CHOICE is pleased to see the Australian Communications and Media Authority will be taking compliance with the new code rules very seriously and hence strengthening consumer protection. ■

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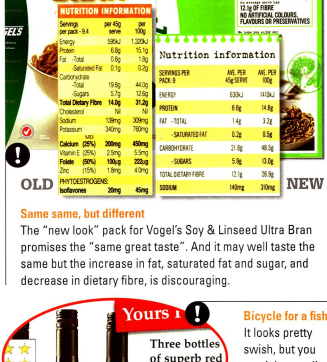
The prize for this month's best entry goes to M. Rhodes, who doesn't judge a cereal by its cover. Thanks also to A. Drew, W. Lane, P. Devine, R. Maneau, M. Floyd and M. Travers for their contributions to this month's Hard word.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.



Same same, but different

The "new look" pack for Vogel's Soy & Linseed Ultra Bran promises the "same great taste". And it may well taste the same but the increase in fat, saturated fat and sugar, and decrease in dietary fibre, is discouraging.

Contains helium balloons?

This carry bag claims to make gas bottles lighter. This must surely confound one or more law of physics.

NEW
Fits Mid Bottles
Carry Your Gas Bottles With Ease
Cleverly designed Gas Bottle Butler makes transporting your gas bottle from your car to the service station safer and easier. The two strong and sturdy carry handles means no more digging and cuts into your hands or accidental dings in your car. The normally cumbersome bottle is much lighter and easier to manage than ever before. Made from 900 denier nylon.
H1251 Ez Gas Bottle Butler $14.90

And it's goodnight from me…

CHOICE subscriber Patricia Devine tells us these ones reminded her of a classic line from the *Two Ronnies*, where "one half of the people can't read, one half can't write, and the other three quarters can't add up!"

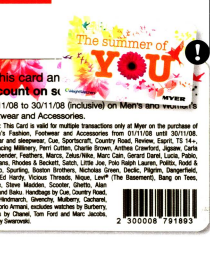
Bicycle for a fish?

It looks pretty swish, but you won't be needing this corkscrew for these bottles.

Yours
Three bottles of superb red and a deluxe corkscrew
(together
Yours FREE
Three bottles of superb red and a deluxe corkscrew
Together worth $115

Weight-loss incentive

After getting this discount voucher for joining WeightWatchers, our reader figured she'd lose a few kilos wandering around Myer trying to find something that *wasn't* excluded.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2 300008 791893

Only at Woolworths, 100% pomegranate juice is available in four great flavours from the produ… ment

110% for effort

How on Earth can "100% pomegranate juice" come in four different flavours?